Willow Tickell

A Gift from Artemis

Willow Tickell was brought up in Epsom, Surrey. After graduating in English she married an Antarctic biologist and moved to the United States for two years, where she worked as a librarian. In 1966 she returned to live in the Shetland Islands, where her son was born. Soon afterwards she went to Africa, and was in Uganda during the Amin coup before moving to Kenya. Since 1977 she has lived with her family in Bristol, apart from four years in Malawi, where she first started to write.

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To Lance

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Unfortunately Gilead does not exist, and to my knowledge there is no Lutyens house in Central Bristol. Neither is there a BAFTA award for best historical documentary. The characters portrayed in this book are also entirely imaginary.

Chapter 1

The house reminded Saskia of Gilead. But Gilead would never be raped in the way this house was being raped now. Rubble poured from the Georgian façade as workmen wrenched out the window frames, scattering showers of antique glass. Through one of the gaping holes an exquisitely carved mantelpiece was being lowered on a rope towards the jaws of a waiting skip.

She watched with mounting anger. She'd first seen the house in October, three months ago, when she'd come to Bristol in search of ideas for her next documentary. Then it was empty but still intact, dreaming of past glories behind a screen of golden-leaved trees. Today those trees were stumps, and its original serene elegance had been almost destroyed. Any chance of using it for location shots had gone.

As the mantelpiece scraped against the wall huge splinters were torn from the honey-coloured wood. A young workman, hair cropped into a bristling mat, and wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with the words 'Fastest Screw in the West', received it unceremoniously into tattooed arms.

He swung it over to the skip, and then caught sight of Saskia, tall and slender in her black leggings and jet-buttoned Edwardian boots. She was sitting on the low wall which divided the house from the pavement. Her hair, a deep brown streaked with lighter tones like veined agate, was scattered by the January wind across the shoulders of her suede jacket.

He stopped, took in her clipboard and Polaroid camera, and flexed his arms ostentatiously.

'Reporter, are you, my love? How'd you like to take a photo of me? Ever seen muscles like that before?'

'Often,' said Saskia, but not as crushingly as she might have done.

He had a smile which could have been attractive without the macho pose, and she needed information from him. Besides, two years of working with male television crews had taught her how to deal with sexist remarks. She smiled back. He puffed out his chest hopefully.

'What's going to happen to the house?' she asked.

'Refurbishment as offices. Best thing for a dump like this. We're replacing the windows with PVC frames, chucking out those dust-trap fireplaces, and putting in underfloor heating under nice smooth hardboard instead of creaky planks. The old place won't know herself when we've finished.'

'Nor will anyone else,' said Saskia. 'And what'll you do with the stuff you're taking out? Send it to the tip?'

He winked knowingly at her.

'Got your eye on a mantelpiece, have you? All the yuppies are after them. Sorry, darling, but the junk's going to a reclamation yard.'

'How on earth did the owner get planning permission?'

'Search me. But LeValet always gets what he wants in the end. I've worked for his outfit before, and he has everything well sewn up before we start.'

'Stitched up, I'd say,' said Saskia. 'So this LeValet is your boss? He must know this is a listed building. It's part of the city's history. Hannah More held anti-slavery meetings here.'

'Who's she? I don't care if the Virgin Mary had meetings here, as long as I've got a job.'

For the hundredth time Saskia gave herself a silent

reminder that not everyone shared her passion for history. Even when she was a child she'd been fascinated by stories of the past. In her teens, in the bad time after her father's death, they'd become almost an obsession, a sure way of retreating from her everyday life.

She smiled again at the workman.

'Sorry,' she said, 'I should have explained. Hannah More lived here in the eighteenth century. She was a reformer who tried to stop the slave trade.'

'Not many laughs there, I should think. Never mind, doll, it doesn't bother me. We're just finishing for the day, anyway. How about a quick pint afterwards?'

In spite of his behaviour he was about as threatening as a bulldog puppy, and she knew she'd probably get more information from him over a drink. But her attention was distracted by a gang of workmen staggering down the front steps with bundles of banister struts and a pair of mahogany newel posts.

'But that's a whole staircase!' said Saskia in horror. 'It must be over two hundred years old. Isn't this LeValet going to leave anything behind?'

He ignored her.

'What paper are you on? Not the *Sun*?' he asked hopefully.

Saskia was diverted again by angry voices and the wail of a child. A band of squatters began to descend the steps carrying an assortment of clothes and household goods. They weren't tramps. They were too clean and had too many possessions for that. One of the men, pale and hollow-eyed, was arguing violently with the foreman who was hustling them out of the house.

The rear of the procession was brought up by a young girl wheeling a large old-fashioned pram stuffed with a bulging dustbin liner and a collection of rampantly healthy pot plants. Tucked into the hood sat a baby of about twelve

months, tears spilling out of startled eyes and mouth set in a howl.

Saskia felt her self-control slipping away.

'I suppose they're being chucked on the scrap heap like everything else? For God's sake, they've a baby with them and it's freezing out here. Where'll they go?'

The workman looked uneasy and didn't answer. He sidled away behind the skip.

The girl hesitated at the top of the steps. The foreman took her arm.

'Fascist pig!' she shrieked at him. 'Don't you dare to touch us.'

She was small and thin, with spiky blonde hair which made her look like a ruffled duckling. She wore faded denim dungarees over a football shirt. The legs were rolled up above shrunken red socks and a pair of Doc Marten's.

'Out!' the foreman shouted back at her, belly bulging over his trouser belt, his hard hat rammed over hostile eyes. 'Think yourself lucky I didn't call the police. I know you lot forced an entry last night.'

'And where do you expect us to go? I bet you'd never let your family sleep rough.'

'You should have thought of that before you had a kid,' he said. 'But your sort never does. Anyway, there's no need to sleep rough. The social'll look after you.'

'The social's shut by now. And they'd just shunt us off to a bed and breakfast. I've had all that before, cooped up in one room night and day with the baby, and the landlord giving us hell if we step out of line. No thanks.'

She began to bump the pram down the steps, but she was so slight she could hardly control the weight. Saskia rushed to help her, steadying it until she reached the pavement. The foreman remained at the top of the flight, lighting a cigarette, while the girl attempted to soothe

the baby, whose wails had risen to a series of shrieks. The other squatters were already beginning to drift away resignedly.

Saskia had been looking at locations all day, and she was tired and disheartened by the damage to the house. But that was nothing compared to what was happening now. She marched up the steps. The foreman stared belligerently at her.

'Where's your boss's office?' she demanded.

'What's that to do with you? You keep out of this.'

Saskia had a small Rollei camera in her pocket loaded with black and white film. She deliberately started to take photos of him, manoeuvring herself backwards down the steps so that he'd look even more menacing as he loomed above her.

'Hey, stop that!' he shouted, beginning to lumber towards her.

'Sorry, but no,' she said, retreating towards the pavement, and on the way taking more photos of the contents of the skip. 'This boss of yours isn't going to be too pleased when he sees an article about his activities in the national press. Perhaps it'll make him more careful next time.'

The girl stood by the front wall, still trying to soothe the baby.

'Do you mind?' asked Saskia, gesturing at her with the camera. 'Let's try to make King Kong here see the light.'

The girl grinned. She suddenly looked much younger, and Saskia realised she could only be about twenty. She dived into the recesses of the pram, dragged out a bit of cardboard with the words 'Hungry and Homeless' on it, and stood by the pram striking a pose. The baby stared wide-eyed round the hood at her, its cheeks streaked with tears.

'Great,' said Saskia, taking more shots, working fast

against the fading light. 'If that doesn't impress the *Guardian*, nothing will.'

The foreman, who'd been momentarily shocked into inaction, lunged for the camera. She dodged to the other side of the wall, wondering if the time had come to run.

The deep, imperious blare of a car horn arrested them all. A grey limousine, heavy and powerful, with darkened glass windows, glided slowly past them on the other side of the road. As it went by the electric window rolled noiselessly down and a man's arm, covered in immaculately tailored cloth, appeared. It gestured impatiently at the foreman to move the squatters on. The face beyond the arm was invisible.

The foreman had stopped in his tracks, ruddy face pale.

'Christ, that's all I need,' he said. 'LeValet himself. Like a bloody sniffer dog he is, when trouble's about. I want you lot out of here ten minutes ago. Is that understood? Otherwise we'll make you go.'

He beckoned impatiently to the other workmen who'd been hanging about at the bottom of the steps. The girl had already stowed away the piece of cardboard. She grabbed the handle of the pram.

'Come on,' she said to Saskia. 'If that really was LeValet we'd better go. There's a caff round the corner. Stand me a cup of coffee and I'll fill you in on the bastard there.'

The workmen had gathered round them in a silent semi-circle. Saskia didn't really believe they'd dare to try anything, but it wasn't worth risking. The square on the other side of the road was deserted, and it was almost dark. She tucked her arm into the girl's.

'We don't seem to have much choice,' she said.

The café was comfortingly full, the air thick with smoke and a smell of frying chips. When the girl had parked the

pram in a corner by a fruit machine they found an empty table. An island of sauce bottles reared up from a sea of shiny blue oilcloth.

'My name's Freddy Carter,' said the girl, 'and this is Jules.'

She settled the baby in her lap. As she took off his knitted cap her hands shook. The child was startlingly dark against her fairness, olive-skinned with silky black hair. He'd stopped crying except for an occasional hiccup, and was now mesmerised by the flicker of lights on the fruit machine.

'And I'm Saskia Tyrrell.'

Her own hands were freezing, and she pushed them up the sleeves of her sweater to warm them. A waitress in a nylon overall with several missing buttons slapped a menu in front of them.

'It's a bit smoky in here for Jules,' said Freddy, 'but it's warm, and the coffee's good.'

Saskia was longing for a cigarette, but reluctantly abandoned the idea. She'd been trying to give up anyway. She'd only started to smoke recently, when the strain of living with Adrian began to tell. It was depressing how fast the initial glamour of their relationship had worn off. Yet the prospect of living with the dynamic Adrian Greer, who had a stack of awards and a highly regarded historical documentary series of his own, had seemed so alluring six months ago.

'Do you really work for the papers?' asked Freddy. She licked her finger, and began dabbing at some grains of sugar spilled on the cloth, delicately transferring them to her mouth.

'No, I make films. I'm a producer with Metropolis Television. I was researching location shots for a documentary today.'

'Sounds ace. Do you need a degree for a job like that?'

'Not really, though I did do history at college first. But my time at film school was much more useful. Then I was lucky and got a job as an assistant producer with Metropolis.'

Through ferociously hard work, an almost instinctive ability to produce good shots from the most unpromising material, and a fund of new ideas, she'd revitalised the children's programme she was assigned to. A year ago, when she was twenty-five, she'd been promoted to full producer on Adrian's team. He'd taught her a lot, including some things she'd rather not have known. He was brilliant technically, a genius at drumming up funds for his programmes, and equally practised at manipulating people to his own ends.

Saskia, intensely ambitious, was overwhelmed by his interest in her at first. He picked up her ideas with flattering enthusiasm, and it was wonderful to be able to make historical documentaries full-time. Only recently had she begun to realise that he was subtly passing off her ideas as his own.

People were leaving the next table, pushing aside the debris of a meal. Freddy leaned over and picked up a discarded slice of bread, folding it neatly into her mouth.

'I was at college too,' she said, 'doing horticulture here in Bristol. I got my diploma, but I blew any career by having the baby. Not that he wasn't worth it, of course.'

She kissed the top of his head, nuzzling his hair, but her eyes were following the waitress and the tray of food she was carrying. Saskia, whose mind was still on Adrian, realised with a shock that Freddy's shaking hands were due to simple hunger. She pushed the menu towards her.

'Please, choose whatever you like. I can charge it to expenses – after all, you are going to fill me in on the local scene.'

'Can you really?' said Freddy, her face lighting up. 'I

was just wondering where the next meal was coming from when those yobbos threw us out.'

'Tell me more about LeValet,' said Saskia, when the waitress had taken their order. 'Is he really so powerful?'

'He likes to think of himself as a local hero, but he's the biggest shit in town. He goes in for property development, sites with listed houses where no one's been able to get planning permission. He always fixes it somehow. He's got friends in high places.'

'What sort of development? Private flats and offices?'

'Sometimes, but that's not how he really scores. He pretends to be the caring face of capitalism. His biggest racket is providing places for old people. They're called Happy Valley Homes. He can't change the basic structure of these listed houses too much, so they still look fairly good, but when you go inside they've been totally gutted and then remodelled. He crams the poor old wrinklies into rooms like egg boxes.'

'How do you know so much about them?' Saskia asked.

'I once worked as a cleaner in a Happy Valley home. All the oldies are on income support, and too frail to fight for something better. The social think LeValet's doing them a wonderful favour. He goes in for bed and breakfast hotels too, dumps for people like me. The social love that as well, because then we're off the homeless statistics.'

The waitress wiped their table with a grey cloth, and clattered knives and forks in front of them. Freddy waited till she'd gone to collect the order.

'One day someone'll dish the dirt on him,' she said, 'but you'd better not try. He's too big for one person to take on.'

'I'll think about it,' said Saskia obstinately.

The waitress returned with their food, and they dropped the subject while Freddy ploughed through an enormous

plate of eggs, chips and beans. Saskia finished her bacon sandwich and sent for second cups of coffee. Jules chewed contentedly on a chip dipped in egg yolk, one sticky hand in his hair, eyes drooping in the heat.

'Where'll you go now?' Saskia asked Freddy. She couldn't bear to think of her and the baby huddled in some draughty doorway.

'There's a refuge in the city centre, but one of my mates from college will probably let me share her room in Clifton tonight.'

'Does the baby's father live here? Could he help you out? It must be tough for you all alone.'

'Everyone asks that,' said Freddy in a resigned tone. 'But he can't, because I don't know where he is. I met him in France, in my final year at college. I was fed up with swotting, and I'd hitched over to Giverny in the last week of the Easter vacation to see Monet's garden. Do you know it? Brilliant colours, just like his paintings.'

Her gaze became dreamy.

'That's what I wanted to be, a landscape gardener. And what've I got instead? A load of pot plants and a baby!'

She gently smoothed the child's hair and rested her chin on his head, still staring into the distance.

'He was an art student. His names was Jules, so I called the baby that too. He was making a bit extra doing paintings for tourists. He took me out to dinner in a brilliant little bistro, and one thing led to another. We stayed together till I had to go home. When I knew I was expecting, and tried to trace him through his art school, no one had heard of him. I think he'd given me a false name. I don't suppose he wanted responsibility any more than I did. You know what men are like. Have you got a bloke?'

'Yes, I live with someone in London,' said Saskia cautiously. Adrian and his immaculate riverside flat seemed light years away from the sort of life Freddy endured.

'Sounds cosy,' she said, without a trace of envy, 'up there among the fat cats. Lucky you.'

'He's a fat cat all right,' said Saskia. 'He makes sure he gets the cream too.'

It was the first time she'd admitted out loud what she'd been discovering so painfully over the last few months.

'Sorry,' said Freddy. 'I reckon you deserve better than that. You've been good to me.'

She began to put on Jules's cap.

'Thanks a million for the meal,' she said, 'but I must push on up the hill to Clifton if I want to catch my mate at home.'

'Sorry I can't give you a lift,' said Saskia, 'but we'd never get the pram into my car.'

'It's OK,' said Freddy. 'I can manage.'

She stood up with Jules in her arms. Saskia had already paid the waitress. Embarrassed, she forced into Freddy's pocket the twenty-pound note she had left in her purse.

'Please, do take it,' she said. 'It might help a bit.'

Freddy looked equally embarrassed.

'Thanks again,' she said. 'I'll pay you back, honest. I'll send it to you at Metropolis.'

She tucked Jules up in the pram, and shrugged on a threadbare coat she'd dragged from the depths of the bin liner. Saskia went to hold open the door. Freddy levered the pram outside.

'Well, I'm off,' she said. 'See you around, maybe, and good luck with the film.'

She gave a jaunty smile and began to trundle the pram away, thin shoulders hunched against the wind, the wheels bumping on the uneven pavement.

Saskia watched her go. Freddy looked too small and vulnerable to take on society single-handed. She wondered guiltily if she should have asked them back to Morwenna's flat, where she was staying for the night. But though

Morwenna, a friend working in Bristol as a freelance camerawoman, was an ardent feminist, she'd never extend her enthusiasm to babies.

Still worrying, Saskia traced her way back along the side of the square to have one more look at the house. The workmen and the skip had gone, and the windows were roughly boarded up. The house looked even worse in the sodium glare of the street lights.

She turned reluctantly towards her car, a temperamental old Beetle sprayed a buttercup yellow, which Adrian called the custard tart. For once it started easily, but the interior was bitterly cold. The heater hadn't worked properly for weeks, and she'd been too busy to have it fixed. Adrian kept nagging her to take it to a scrap yard, but she resolutely refused to give it up.

As she waited for the engine to warm, she saw the grey limousine again, moving slowly towards her along the other side of the road. The window rolled down just a fraction this time, revealing part of a man's face.

She caught a glimpse of pallid skin and cold, expressionless eyes. His hand was hooked over the top of the window, and his fingers drummed on the glass. He gazed at her for a moment and nodded as if he'd fixed her face in his mind. Then the car moved away, cruising on sleek and shark-like through the city night.

Chapter 2

The Beetle struggled up Constitution Hill into Clifton. There was a hole in the exhaust, and it sounded like a climbing Messerschmidt. Saskia tried to ignore the noise, thinking instead how much she'd always loved this part of Bristol high above the Avon Gorge.

In spite of its imposing Regency crescents and squares Clifton still felt like a village, and it still felt like home. She'd spent her early childhood there until her father's death, and even after that, when her mother remarried, she'd continued to come to Clifton for holidays at Gilead, the house owned by her great-aunt Artemis.

She mentally worked out a route that would avoid Gilead. She hadn't seen it for several years, since Artemis went back to Africa, and it could never be the same without her.

Trundling along The Mall she saw that the Aladdin's cave of the antiques market was still there, and the Victorian-fronted chemist's shop, carboys in the window glowing like huge coloured baubles in the reflected light of the street lamps. Passers-by, leaning into the wind, scurried towards the warmth of home.

As she emerged on to the edge of the downs, Brunel's suspension bridge swung away across the Avon Gorge on her left, outlined with lights like raindrops on a spider's web. As always, it simultaneously drew but repelled her. She'd been terrified of heights ever since she'd witnessed her father's death in a car crash. They'd been driving

together along a Cornish cliff road, and skidded on black ice. He was killed instantly, leaving her, a helpless and panic-stricken nine year old, trapped in the wreckage beside him, the car hanging half over the cliff.

She dragged her mind away from the memory, and concentrated instead on steering the Beetle eastwards across the downs to Redland, and the modern block of flats where Morwenna lived. Saskia had known her since their days at film school in London. Then Saskia, fresh from medieval, other worldly Cambridge, and still half immersed in the past, had been struggling to adjust to life in London. Morwenna, the streetwise product of an Essex comprehensive, who'd hustled her way through a dozen jobs while saving up for film school, revelled in it, and taught Saskia to do so as well.

She parked the Beetle, and entered the anonymous lobby of the flats. It smelt of cigarette smoke and past dinners. Morwenna's flat was on the first floor. The front door was plastered with posters exhorting the visitor to save the dolphin and remember Romania. Saskia smiled. Ben, Morwenna's partner, must have put those up.

Morwenna herself flung open the door at the sound of the bell. She'd kicked off her shoes, and was wearing a scarlet chenille tunic over baggy khaki shorts and black tights. Her hair, the unlikely colour of plum jam, had been cut in a jutting bob which just skimmed her ear lobes.

'Saskia! Great to see you!' she cried, grabbing her overnight bag. 'Come in quickly, for Christ's sake. Ben's got a soufflé in the oven, and he says a draught'll kill it.'

She propelled Saskia into the living room. The voice of Michelle Shocked poured like honey over stone from the CD player. Morwenna dumped Saskia's bag in a corner and gestured to an angular black leather couch, which had been made slightly more inviting with an Afghan rug

draped over the back. That would be Ben's doing too, as well as the red silk handkerchiefs toning down the glare of a couple of spotlights.

'What'll you have to drink?' Morwenna demanded, after enquiries about Saskia's drive down and the relating of messages from mutual London friends. 'Ben's on Rioja, and I've got a lager. You look as if you need something stronger. Vodka, maybe?'

'Perfect,' said Saskia gratefully. 'It's been a heavy day. I lost one of my best locations this afternoon, and had a run-in with some toughs.'

She sat down gingerly on the sofa, and looked around. The room, painted white with a grey carpet, was minimally furnished with a few tubular chairs, a chrome and glass dining table, a low sideboard, and on the wall some art photos of advanced urban decay. If Ben hadn't been there Morwenna would probably have left the photos on the floor, propped along the wall. She looked on the flat merely as a launching pad, where she came briefly to recharge before shooting off on another assignment.

'Sounds like the usual scene,' said Morwenna. 'You doing all the work while Adrian basks in the glory.'

She was hovering over a large tin trunk which was doing duty as a drinks stand. She splashed a double measure of vodka into a glass with some tonic, and handed it over.

'And how is dear Adrian?' she said, sitting down beside Saskia. 'Still perfecting the back-stabber's art?'

Saskia smiled absent-mindedly. Talking about the day had made her remember Freddy and the baby. At least they'd be safe and warm for a little while.

'Tell me about this new project,' demanded Morwenna. 'I bet it's your idea not his.'

Saskia sipped her vodka and forced herself to concentrate.

'It's about the Bristol slave trade and Hannah More.

She was one of the first blue stockings and a great reformer. The storyline follows a slave who's shipped from Nigeria to the sugar plantations in Jamaica.'

'I didn't think Adrian was particularly keen on documentaries about strong women. He's the biggest chauvinist I've ever met.'

Morwenna considered it her duty to remind her friends regularly of the failings of their men.

'I'm trying not to tell him too much about it,' said Saskia, 'at least not until the preliminary treatment's cut and dried. He's been busy marketing our programmes abroad, so he hasn't had much time for new projects.'

'He's been thieving your ideas ever since you started working on his series! You ought to move on. Or do you have some mad notion about being loyal to the company? I know you, remember. You may come over as a tough cookie on the outside, thanks to your Aunt Morwenna, but there's still a lot of room for improvement.'

'Thanks a million,' said Saskia with a grin. 'Anyway, where would I go? Be realistic. There are hardly any jobs in my line. It's too specialised. If I left Adrian in the middle of a series he'd make sure I never got work with any of the big companies again. And at least Metropolis pays well.'

'So you admit he's a bastard?' said Morwenna triumphantly. 'You're coming on at last. And anyone who knows your work wouldn't believe a bad reference from Adrian.'

'It doesn't follow. He's got all the kudos for the two programmes I've made for him so far. You've just said that yourself.'

'Go it alone, then. Set up as a freelance like me.'

'You're the one who's mad. That'd need a pile of capital and a base to work from. Now I'm living with Adrian I haven't got a place of my own, and if I

became self-employed I'd never get a mortgage until I could produce proof of profits.'

Morwenna got up and walked around the room, exasperatedly kicking her discarded boots into a corner.

'But think of all the plans we made when we left film school. You have to take some risks. I had to double mortgage this place to raise money for equipment. That bloody Adrian's undermined you. It's fatal to live with a man.'

'You live with Ben,' said Saskia mischievously.

She was used to Morwenna speaking her mind. After sharing innumerable crises at film school they understood each other very well.

'Ben's different. He understands my work comes first. If he wants to do his own thing he's free to go anytime.'

Saskia looked warningly at the kitchen door. There were sounds of increasing activity behind it.

'He can't hear,' said Morwenna carelessly. 'He's perfectly happy cooking up banquets for us both in the evenings, and saving the world during the day. Give Adrian the bullet and stay with us for a bit while you look for another job.'

The kitchen door was opened gently, and Ben appeared holding an oven cloth.

'The soufflé's safe now,' he said. 'Hi, Saskia. How are things in London? I like your boots. Very Gibson girl.'

He had thick straw-coloured hair neatly tied back, and sleepy blue eyes. Morwenna had picked him up on location about a year earlier, when he'd been helping out in the catering caravan. He'd just left cookery school, but seemed totally devoid of ambition. Sunny and easy going, he had slipped easily into the role of Morwenna's house-husband.

He enveloped Saskia in a comfortable hug. He smelt of freshly grated lemon.

'I've just done the dessert, so it's all ready.'

He flung a heavy, old-fashioned damask cloth over the table, and smoothed it flat.

'Wonderful material,' he said. 'I got it in the market. Look at the way it falls.'

He stood back to admire the effect, then took a handful of cutlery from a drawer and began to arrange the place settings with great deliberation. The only child of a widowed mother, he'd lived amiably under her thumb for years, first as a day boy at a local public school and then as a trainee stockbroker in his uncle's firm until he was left a small legacy at the age of twenty-one. Then, in a rare mood of self-assertion, he'd suddenly rebelled, paid for a year's cookery course, and soon afterwards escaped his mother entirely by going to live with Morwenna.

'I wish you'd stop trying to turn this place into something from *The World of Interiors*, and get on with it,' said Morwenna. 'We don't want to be late.'

He gave a slightly strained smile, and went back into the kitchen.

'Late for what?' asked Saskia.

She'd found the least uncomfortable position on the sofa, and stretched out her legs. The vodka and the music were dissolving the tensions of the day. It was good to be with Morwenna and Ben. They were an odd but usually harmonious combination, and tonight was the first time Saskia had ever heard Morwenna criticise him.

'A photography exhibition at The Watershed,' said Morwenna. 'You remember, the media centre down by the floating harbour? I've got invitations to a private view.'

It was the last thing Saskia felt like enduring. She'd been to enough of them with Adrian and hated the highly charged atmosphere of sycophantic congratulation barbed with professional rivalry.

'I'd rather pass,' she said. 'You and Ben go. I'll be fine here. I must write up my notes while today's still fresh in my mind.'

Ben emerged bearing the soufflé, puffed like a golden cumulus above the rim of the dish, and bringing with it a mouth-watering smell of toasted cheese.

'Ben's going to watch some cookery guru on the box. The exhibition's for three of the top British war photographers – all men, of course, but I need to talk to them. I met a guy from one of the New York TV companies last week. He was trying to persuade me to work on a war documentary for them, a sort of Cook's tour of battle zones today.'

They drew up chairs to the table, and Ben began to spoon the soufflé on to their plates.

'But you'd hate war photography,' said Saskia. 'You know what they say about it – ninety-five per cent boredom, five per cent terror. What a way to spend your life! And it messes up everyone who touches it. Those guys are so high on danger, they aren't able to come down.'

'Maybe,' said Morwenna, passing Saskia a basket of French bread, and digging into a salad bowl pungent with herbs. 'But it's a great angle, a female eye on a male-dominated world. The New York guy had just seen the documentary I did for Channel 4 about boys on remand, and thought it wasn't bad.'

This was an understatement. Morwenna had spent a month filming adolescent boys on remand in one of the more notorious northern prisons. Her footage had been so intimate, so sympathetic, and so damning of the regime, that questions had been asked in Parliament.

'You'd lose a lot of artistic freedom in the States,' said Saskia.

'It's only a one-off,' said Morwenna nonchalantly, 'and I

could do with some big bucks. I'd like to buy a giro-zoom. And I shall be back in the States soon, doing another film for Channel 4 about women truckers, so I can check it all out then. Anyway, I think you ought to come with me tonight. It'd do you good to see pictures of the real world instead of floating about in the refined atmosphere of the past.'

'There was nothing very refined about the past, especially here. Bristol merchants dealt in thousands of slaves a year. And I saw enough of the real world this afternoon. A gang of builder's men were gutting a perfect Georgian house. On top of that they threw out a bunch of squatters, including a young mother and her baby. The house was owned by a local shark called LeValet. Do you know anything about him?'

Ben looked up from his plate, interested.

'He's got his finger in all sorts of nasty little pies. Most of his money comes from development, though he calls himself a gentleman farmer. He's got a place out in Severn Vale. It's like an animal Belsen. He was had up recently for discharging toxic waste into the estuary. All the environmental agencies have been after him for years.'

'Don't start on the state of the world or we'll never get to the viewing,' said Morwenna.

'Somebody's got to start on it,' said Ben.

'You're so bloody idealistic, Ben. We don't all want to waste our time waving banners.'

They launched into a long argument Saskia had heard many times before, but this time Morwenna, who usually ended up laughing at Ben, sounded irritable.

The food had all gone by now, and Ben began to clear away the empty dishes.

'That was a gorgeous soufflé,' said Saskia. 'Adrian and I seem to live on ready-cooked meals when we eat at his flat.'

'Don't encourage Ben.' said Morwenna. 'And there's no time for dessert. We'll just have coffee.'

'Morwenna's jealous because she can't cook,' he said lightly, but he looked hurt. 'I'm surprised you hadn't heard of LeValet before, Saskia. He's lived in Bristol all his life. Weren't you brought up here?'

'Only until I was nine,' she said. 'When my father died I went away to boarding school, though I came to stay with my great-aunt in Clifton for most of the holidays until she decided to live permanently in Africa.'

'I never knew that. Why haven't you told me about her?' said Morwenna.

Ben went out into the kitchen to fetch fruit and coffee.

'It wasn't specially important,' said Saskia, keeping her voice deliberately vague.

She already regretted saying as much as she had. Morwenna was like a terrier with a subject that caught her attention.

Though Saskia was nineteen when Artemis went back to Africa for good, she'd never stopped missing her. Her grandparents had died when she was very young, and apart from her mother and an aunt in Northumberland, whom she never saw, Artemis was her only remaining relative. She'd jealously kept the memory of Gilead and the holidays spent there to herself. In the years between her father's death and going to Cambridge she'd only been truly happy with Artemis.

Morwenna produced a crumpled pack of French Gitanes and a lighter from her pocket. They were Artemis's favourite cigarettes too. It was the first thing Saskia had noticed about Morwenna when they met in the refectory at film school.

Morwenna lit her cigarette and made some remark to Ben. Saskia didn't hear her. The smoke was drifting

across the table, bringing back almost too vividly the time Artemis had announced that she was returning to Africa.

She'd been sitting in the study at Gilead. Her untidy pile of silver hair, escaping as usual from its tortoiseshell combs, was outlined against the high back of her favourite Arab chair. It was a chilly morning during Saskia's first spring vacation, and Artemis was muffled in a scarlet Somali shawl, one hand emerging from time to time so that she could drag compulsively on her cigarette.

'I'm growing old, Saskia darling,' she said. Her long clever face lit up with an impulsive smile. 'England's no good for me any more. It's too cold, and old age attracts no respect here.'

Saskia had started to protest, but Artemis held up her hand.

'Yes, I know you love me, maybe even respect me, if I'm lucky, but there are very few people left in this country who care for me as you do. You're happy at Cambridge, and your best years are still to come. Soon you won't need me any more. And I want to have one last best time too, before it's too late. I was seventy-nine this year, you know. At the end of your summer vacation I'm going back to live in Africa.'

Saskia felt as if the ground had slipped away beneath her.

'I'll always need you,' she said passionately. 'You can't do this. It's crazy. I won't let you.'

'Because I'm old, you mean?' said Artemis with a quizzical smile. 'But when you're old it's essential to retain a little craziness. Remember that. You may as well turn up your toes and die once you lose it. I've always acted on impulse. The best things happen then. That's how I met Carl.'

She picked up the leather-framed photo on her desk.

The face of a young man smiled out at her. His hair was swept back forties-style above strong Scandinavian features. Across the base were scrawled the words: 'Artemis, always and forever, Carl'.

She'd smiled back at the photo as though it were alive, and then replaced it gently on the desk, the heavy silver bracelets chinking together on her wrist.

The remembered sound, so characteristic of Artemis, was replaced by a clatter of china. Saskia looked up, confused, and saw not Carl but Ben smiling at her as he put a tray of coffee cups and a bowl of fruit on the table. He waved his hand in front of her eyes.

'Hey, Saskia, what's up? Have you seen a ghost?'

It took her a moment or two to adjust, the memory had been so vivid.

'Of course not. It's just that something reminded me of Gilead. I'd been thinking of it all day for some odd reason.'

'Gilead?' enquired Ben.

'My great-aunt's house. I haven't been there for years.'

'Why did she go to Africa? She must have been quite old.'

'She'd always loved it. She was an anthropologist. She did her best work there. Anyway, there was no stopping Artemis, ever, once she fixed her mind on something.'

'Artemis?' said Morwenna in a voice that was suddenly sharp. 'Not Artemis Venner? *The* Artemis Venner?'

She'd put down her cigarette and was idly peeling the rough pink coat from a lychee, but now she discarded that too and leaned forward excitedly.

'Yes, the Artemis Venner,' said Saskia, resigned now to the usual rush of questions. The tone of Morwenna's voice was the other reason she'd never publicised her relationship with Artemis.

'Who's she, anyway?' said Ben. 'Have some coffee,

Saskia. You'll need it if you're going to look at horrors for the rest of the evening.'

'Where've you been, Ben?' Morwenna said irritably. 'Artemis Venner, one of the first feminist movers and shakers. She lived for years with some matriarchal African tribe, and produced all sorts of amazing data. Later feminists used it to prove that female-dominated societies are far more efficient than those organised by men.'

'They haven't exactly proved it,' said Saskia, 'though I know you'd like them to.'

'She's always trying to prove it to me,' said Ben.

He put his hand on Morwenna's shoulder, but she shrugged it off.

'She had to leave Africa during the last world war,' Morwenna continued, 'so she went to the States to do some work on the Red Indians.'

'Pueblo Indians. They're different,' said Saskia resignedly. She decided she'd better try to tell the story herself, rather than have to listen to Morwenna's Technicolor version. 'Twentieth Century Fox were making a film out there, and that's when she met Carl Sandstrom.'

'Wasn't he some film star?' asked Ben, handing Saskia her cup. 'You'll like this blend of coffee. It's a mixture of Java and Peabody.'

'Don't you ever think about anything else except cookery?' said Morwenna. 'He was the greatest film idol since Ramon Navarro – bigger even than Clark Gable. He and Artemis had a raging love affair.'

'How do you know so much about it, anyway?' Ben asked Morwenna, with a wink at Saskia. 'I didn't think you were interested in male film stars.'

'I'm not, dumbo,' she said. 'But about a year ago I worked with a Channel 4 producer who was trying to set up a documentary about them. Artemis Venner got

wind of it and fought him every inch of the way, even threatened to sue, so it was dropped.'

'The press had been bastards to her during the affair,' said Saskia fiercely, abandoning her attempts to be impartial in her desire to defend Artemis.

'That's why Sandstrom never gives interviews these days,' said Morwenna. 'Though I read somewhere that he's coming to London for a retrospective at the National Film Theatre in the spring.'

'So what happened next?' Ben asked Saskia.

'They lived together in Hollywood for a while, but Artemis wanted to resume her work in Africa. He felt he couldn't abandon his wife – she'd had schizophrenia for years. The press took the line that Sandstrom could do no wrong, and of course his studio fostered that image. In the end she went back alone to England, then on to Africa, as soon as the war finished.'

'How old was she when you went to stay with her?'

'Just seventy, when she'd started to spend more time at Gilead.'

'Have you seen her since she returned to Africa?' said Ben. 'You must have missed her.'

'I'd already done a year at Cambridge when she left,' said Saskia lightly, 'and I was meeting new people there all the time.'

She wasn't going to let them know the sense of loss she'd experienced. Even taking on a gruelling holiday job in the Christmas vacation hadn't blotted it out. She'd visited Artemis in Africa the following Easter, but she was so involved with her new research project that there had been little opportunity for the intimate conversations of the past.

After that, studying for exams, and then film school and the job at Metropolis, had claimed all Saskia's time. In any case she'd got the impression lately from Artemis's

more and more infrequent letters that as she aged all other contacts apart from her African community were becoming less important to her.

'Was it Artemis who got you interested in photography?' asked Morwenna. 'This guy at Channel 4 told me she'd made some wonderful film of tribal life in the thirties, as good as Leni Riefenstahl's African work after the war, but she'd only show it at learned meetings.'

'She had an old Bolex movie camera she let me use,' said Saskia cautiously, 'and there was a dark room at Gilead. I used to mess around there a bit.'

'An old Bolex – fantastic!' said Morwenna. 'I saw one of those the other day in a saleroom. Incredibly simple and sturdy. You could take them anywhere.'

To Saskia's relief the conversation switched to technicalities while they finished their coffee. Morwenna gave Ben his final orders before she bustled Saskia into her car.

'Don't forget to turn on the washing-up machine, and be sure to answer the phone. I'm expecting a message from New York, and I don't want to lose an assignment just because you can't take your eyes off Delia Smith.'

It took only five minutes to hurtle down the hill from Redland and park in a draughty lot by the dock. The wind had gone strongly round to the west, and funnelled up the cobbled quayside which led to The Watershed. A few small boats bobbed drunkenly about in the water.

When they pushed through the door into the exhibition area a rush of warm air greeted them. Waitresses were circulating with trays of wine among a crush of people.

The room was full of babble – the sort of babble Adrian loved but Saskia had come to loathe. She knew how the photographers must feel at having their work exhibited to this sort of superficial gaze. She'd learned to endure the comments when her own films were shown, to sift

the patter of polite praise from genuine admiration, but it had never come easily to her.

Tonight there was really no reason why she should be putting up with any of this, except for Morwenna's sake. She was already on the other side of the room with a glass in her hand, screeching like a mynah bird at one of the organisers.

A peaceful evening with Ben and Delia Smith seemed more and more enticing, but she resisted the thought. Adrian would never run away from a professional gathering. He'd be in the thick of it, picking up gossip, dropping unpleasant hints about rivals, and generally manipulating the occasion to his own ends. If she wanted to get on, she'd better pull herself together and join the fray.

She dumped her jacket on a chair by the window before going to inspect the pictures. Her face was reflected back in the plate glass, pale as skimmed milk, with her hair framing it in a dark haze. She was wearing a green tunic of crushed velvet which she'd picked up in a charity shop. The colour shimmered in the glare of the spotlights.

The photographs by the first two artists were factual, brutal records of carnage for which they must have risked their lives over and over again. Saskia moved round them feeling slightly sick, yet trying to remain dispassionate enough to study the technique.

The work of the third exhibitor, Munro Hawkshaw, was different. He'd observed the aftermath of war as well, with an eye which combined ruthlessness and sympathy in equally disturbing proportions.

A Sudanese child, hair white with dust from a recent explosion, tears streaming in shining channels down his cheeks, stood by his dead mother's corpse. Frantic with grief, a Somali woman ran across a street, arms outstretched, to the body of her husband, and was caught

by the camera at the moment a sniper's bullet entered her chest.

The images were so shocking that Saskia felt like a voyeur, as though she should avert her eyes from such grief and pain, and yet the pity of war was almost palpable as well.

Eventually she came on the last picture, displayed slightly apart from the others as a sort of coda. It affected her like a physical blow. It showed Artemis, her hair knotted up carelessly beneath a dust-streaked sunhat, riding a mangy donkey through a refugee village. She was laughing at the camera.

It was the first photo Saskia had seen of her for some time. Her legs in baggy trousers dangled on either side of the donkey. Her knobbly arthritic feet were thrust into a pair of rubber sandals. She was surrounded by a crowd of refugee women with hoes over their shoulders and babies on their backs, going to plant the spring maize.

'Impressive, aren't they?' said Morwenna's voice. 'And isn't that Artemis Venner? What an odd coincidence.'

She'd appeared at Saskia's side, clutching her third glass of wine, her face brimming with excitement and determination.

'Come and meet the guy who took them,' she said. 'I could do with some support.'

Reluctantly Saskia allowed herself to be propelled through the thinning crowd to a display table by the window which was stacked with books on the photographers' work.

A tall man in faded blue jeans and a leather jacket was standing there, listening impassively to a woman with a gold-chained handbag and too much blusher gushing about his photos. He signed the copy of the book she'd just bought, shut it with a snap, and handed it unsmilingly to her.

'He's not doing much to increase his sales,' said Saskia. 'Are you sure you want to meet him?'

'Of course I do,' said Morwenna. 'He should be able to give me some contacts in Africa.'

'Aren't you overdoing the optimism?' said Saskia. 'He looks about as friendly as a minefield.'

'That's probably because his girlfriend was killed in Ethiopia last year. His agent's just been telling me about it. But that was more than eight months ago. He ought to have recovered by now. Anyway, he shouldn't have come here if he didn't want to meet people.'

She marched up to him.

'Hi,' she said breezily, 'I just wanted to tell you how much I like your work. I'm Morwenna Bly. I do freelance television photography. I'm based here in the west. And this is Saskia Tyrrell. She produces for Metropolis.'

He gazed at them both without replying. He was in his early-thirties, with thick untidy brown hair pushed carelessly away from his face and falling almost to his collar at the back. He had a nose which looked as if it might have been broken at some time, and a mouth whose curving lower lip was counteracted by the stubborn line of the upper. He looked tired and wary. Behind him the lights of the quayside shifted and dazzled through the streams of rain now running down the window glass.

Still he said nothing. Morwenna, obviously regarding him as a challenge, launched another comment with all the finesse of an Exocet.

'Marvellous work, as I said, but I wonder why hardly any of you war photographers show women taking an active role in combat? They're usually passive, suffering, never fighting or protesting. I suppose it's because men start wars and they expect women to put up with them.'

Saskia winced, remembering how his girlfriend had

died. He focused on Morwenna slowly, as if he'd come back from miles away.

'Plenty of African women fought in Ethiopia,' he said, 'but usually they're too busy behind the scenes holding their families together to do much else. They certainly aren't passive.'

'I may be going out to Somalia shortly. Marathon TV in New York want me to work on a documentary on war from a woman's angle. I wondered if you had any contacts there you could pass on to me?'

'I'm out of touch now,' he said shortly. 'I've been away some time. All my contacts in Somalia are probably dead. Things change fast in Africa.'

He suddenly and disconcertingly turned to Saskia, as if he were determined to change the subject at all costs.

'So you work for Metropolis?' he said. 'I sold some stills to them about two years ago, though I wasn't particularly happy about it afterwards. Which series are you on?'

'*Past Lives*. We do historical documentaries.'

'Then Adrian Greer must be your series producer. He's the one who took my stills. He was making a film on Victorian explorers in Africa, and he wanted some shots of Harar. It's an Ethiopian city visited by Richard Burton. What do you think of Greer's work?'

'It's innovative,' said Saskia cautiously.

'I suppose that's one way of putting it. He used my photos all out of context, and tried to imply that Burton contracted a secret marriage in Harar. I've never seen such inaccurate rubbish.'

Saskia knew the film he meant. Adrian had made it before she came to work for him. His fabrication of a completely untrue storyline, with a studio mock-up of life in a tropical brothel, had brought violent protests from historians and Mrs Whitehouse, and pushed *Past Lives* to the top of the ratings. The knowledge that

Munro Hawkshaw was right made her perversely eager to defend Adrian.

'He gets good audiences, and he makes people interested in history,' she said. 'Anyway, how can you take such a high moral stance? Those photos of yours are a blatant invasion of privacy. What right do you have to invade people's suffering, to make it public like that? And they're people who can't defend themselves. You can't sue for damages in the third world.'

He looked at her as though he'd registered her presence properly for the first time.

'You have a point there,' he said, with surprising candour. 'I've often asked myself that. But I try to get permission if I can, and usually people feel it's the only way the West is going to learn about their suffering.'

'You certainly couldn't have asked Artemis Venner's permission,' said Saskia. 'She loathes being photographed.'

'So you know Artemis Venner? That's interesting, since I'm the only photographer she's allowed near her for several years.'

'She's my great-aunt,' said Saskia. 'I haven't spoken to her for a while, but I do know how she feels about the press.'

'She's the most remarkable woman I ever met,' he said. 'I stayed with her in northern Kenya for a month recently. She asked me to help her raise funds for a nearby refugee camp. You're lucky to have her as a relative.'

Saskia was becoming increasingly irritated by his patronising tone, but she couldn't resist asking him about Artemis.

'How is she these days?' she said.

'Frail but happy, growing old disgracefully, which is the way she wants it. Does she know you work for Adrian Greer?'

'She was the one who encouraged me take up film

making in the first place.' said Saskia, trying to control her resentment at the question. She had no intention of answering it, though for a long time she'd been uncomfortably aware of how much Artemis would have disliked Adrian.

The room was emptying fast, and the organiser had been hovering by the door, trying to catch Hawkshaw's eye and wind up the event. He saw her at last, and looked intensely relieved. He got up from his seat on the edge of the display stand, his hands thrust into the pockets of his jacket.

'I think that's enough of the chattering classes for one evening,' he said. 'See you around, maybe.'

He nodded at them unceremoniously and moved away towards the door. Although he was alone he walked as though he was determinedly forging his way through a crowd.

'What an awkward bastard,' said Morwenna indignantly. 'He'd better never want a favour off me. Typical obstructive male.'

She complained about him all the way back to the flat. Saskia responded vaguely, her mind on the photo of Artemis, wishing she would write more often. If Munro Hawkshaw had been easier to talk to, there were so many questions she could have asked him.

As they walked into the living room Ben was standing, grave-faced, watching the end of the BBC television news. The newscaster was just recapping the main items. He gestured at them to watch.

For the second time that evening Saskia saw Munro's picture of Artemis as it flashed on to the television screen. She clung to the back of the sofa, knowing already what it meant.

'And finally, this was the day the news was released of the death of Artemis Venner,' said Moira Stewart, 'the

eminent anthropologist and forerunner of feminism who shocked public opinion in the forties by leaving the film star Carl Sandstrom for her career. She spent the last years of her life trying, in her own words, to repay what she owed the third world. Her work raised the status of women everywhere.'

Chapter 3

Ben went out and bought an armful of newspapers next morning. The more up-market ran half-page obituaries of Artemis, chronicling her academic achievements. The tabloids splashed out into double page spreads which gleefully resurrected her affair with Carl Sandstrom.

Saskia, who'd been lying awake half the night aching with grief yet for some reason unable to cry, felt a little better when she read that Artemis had died instantly of a heart attack while enjoying herself at a tribal feast. After the cremation in Nairobi her ashes were to be scattered on Mount Kenya.

'She had a wonderful life, and a long one,' said Morwenna, as she was seeing Saskia off after breakfast. 'Don't be too sad.'

Morwenna had been surprisingly sympathetic so far, but she couldn't resist a parting shot.

'She didn't waste her life, either, hanging around servicing a man's career. And nor should you. Seriously, Saskia, you've spent long enough with Adrian.'

Saskia wound up the rest of her research by lunchtime, and made for the motorway. She thought about Artemis most of the way back to London. That automatically brought back memories of Gilead, and made Adrian's flat seem even less like home by the time she'd got to it through the rush hour crowds.

Adrian, now in his late-thirties, had bought a riverside apartment in East London ten years earlier, when it was

still possible to pick up bargains. It had recently been re-decorated by one of Metropolis's designers, and as a result had the atmosphere of a stage set rather than a home.

There was a jacuzzi, a huge satin-quilted bed capable of accommodating several couples at once, a blandly impressive sitting room with a Chinese theme – the designer had just come back from Beijing – and a minute kitchen as white and clinical as a ward treatment room.

Saskia went into the kitchen, where a fridge freezer, packed with ready-made gourmet meals, designer water and Chardonnay, hummed discreetly in one corner. The microwave oven winked its green numerals at her like a watching alien. She made herself some coffee, kicked off her shoes, and flopped on to the sofa as the light faded over the river, trying to remember when her relationship with Adrian had started to turn sour.

She'd met him after far too long slogging away on her children's programme, soaking up technique like a sponge but still getting nowhere near to making the sort of film she was interested in. He'd just returned from making a documentary in the States, and it had seemed like an act of God when she was introduced to him in the staff bar.

Someone had told her he was starting a new series, and she'd casually dropped a few ideas. He took her to dinner at Bibendum, listened to her attentively for another hour, and asked her to let him have a short treatment for a programme.

She'd rushed home to her rented flat in Fulham, and worked all night on an idea for a documentary about Gwen John and her exploitation by the ageing sculptor Rodin in fin-de-siècle Paris.

'Not bad at all,' said Adrian over another dinner two nights later. 'Perhaps it's a tiny bit serioso in places, but

we can easily put in a bit of steam with some nude scenes in the atelier.'

He'd followed this up with the offer of a place as a producer on his team, and while she was still high on praise and success, invited her back to his flat.

She knew she was expected to sleep with him. Scared of losing her big chance, she told herself firmly not to be naive, that it wasn't as if she'd never slept with anyone before. Nevertheless, as she let him undress her rapidly and expertly on the silk-quilted bed she still couldn't help despising herself for resorting to this kind of sexual barter.

It wasn't as bad as she'd feared. Experiencing Adrian's love-making was like being on some immensely efficient conveyor belt. All the right things happened at the right times, with supreme attention to detail, but there was never any real depth of feeling on his part.

She spent many evenings in planning sessions at his flat after that. Sleeping with him became a habit, and it was flattering to be told so often how much he admired her ideas. It was heavenly, too, to whisk around London in the purring warmth of his Porsche, and to go out to dinner when they'd finished work instead of having to cook a meal.

Six months later, when the lease of her flat ran out, and they were still working late every night, it had been easy to move in with him. But now, another six months on, she was beginning to see how deftly he'd exploited her.

The two documentaries she'd produced so far were given massive publicity as Adrian's brain children. He'd insisted on master-minding the lay-out of the credits himself, so that his name as director filled the screen and was held there for several seconds, while hers, as producer, was rushed through with all the other credits in scarcely legible lay-out.

Eventually, when she was half asleep, Adrian arrived. He snapped on the lights and bent to kiss her. His breath smelt of wine and garlic. He was dark, with receding sleeked-back hair, and already needed his second shave of the day. His blue striped shirt was open at the neck, his tie loosened.

'God, what a day,' he said, 'but I've sold our programmes to the Yanks. They're interested in the rest of the series as well.'

He flung himself down next to Saskia, kicking her shoes impatiently to one side.

'I'm knackered. Get me a martini, very dry, there's a good girl.'

The sofa was large, but he seemed to overflow it. He was thickly built, with stubby hands and a fleshy body which needed more exercise than pulling strings and driving the Porsche too fast.

Saskia went over to the vast cocktail cabinet concealed in a Chinese lacquered cupboard, and mixed his drink. She added some ice from the miniature fridge, and gave him the glass and a dish of his favourite taco crisps. Carefully she repositioned herself in a chair some distance away from him. Adrian after a successful marketing session was like a rutting stag, wanting instant sex after conquest.

'So how did things go in Bristol?' he asked, taking a large gulp of his martini. 'Come up with anything good on Hannah More? Christ, what a dismal name. I hope you're right about public interest in the slave trade. I've got a feeling it's a bit old hat after *Roots*.'

'You might as well say the holocaust's old hat,' said Saskia. 'Slavery was just as bad in its own way, and it went on for hundreds of years. It'll only be boring if we make it so.'

'I still think your ideas are terrific, of course,' said Adrian, 'but the problem is that the Americans want

fast, snappy, sexy themes, something that'll appeal to the widest possible audience. Anyway, I told them I'd bring along a detailed treatment for the new programme tomorrow afternoon. We're meeting again then. You've got something ready, haven't you?'

'Almost,' she said grudgingly. 'But it's still not quite settled in my mind. I lost one of my best locations today, a wonderful old house where Hannah More used to hold anti-slavery meetings. It had been gutted by a local property developer.'

She knew Adrian wouldn't be interested, but she found herself pouring out the story.

'It's only a house, for Christ's sake,' he said, hardly restraining his impatience. 'You can use another one like it. Who's to know?'

'I'd know, and any local historian would know as well,' said Saskia angrily. 'I want to keep some integrity on the programme. But I got some good photos of the workmen tearing it apart. I'm going to do an article about it for the *Guardian*. It'll get us some publicity at least.'

'What's the developer's name?' Adrian asked idly, draining his glass.

'LeValet. He's just a local man.'

'Not Gerald LeValet!' said Adrian, sitting bolt upright, and scattering crisps like autumn leaves. 'What the hell are you trying to do, Saskia? Get us both kicked out of Metropolis?'

'No, of course not,' she stammered. 'What's the matter? He's nothing to do with us.'

'He's everything to do with us. If you took some interest in company politics, and forgot about your damned integrity and your history books, you'd know that he's one of the major shareholders in Metropolis. Just a local man! That's a laugh. He's got interests all over the world. It'd be professional suicide for us both if you do that article.'

'All right, I'll give the material to someone else, then,' said Saskia, swiftly regaining her balance. 'Why should he get away with it, whoever he is? It was an act of sheer vandalism, and he was victimising some squatters as well. At least I know a bit about what goes on in the ordinary world, unlike you. I suppose you do realise there are people out there sleeping in cardboard boxes and scrabbling for non-existent jobs?'

'Don't be ridiculous. Of course I do,' said Adrian coldly. 'But we all have to make what we can of our chances, and I can't help it if these people have fucked up theirs.'

'Maybe they never had your chances to begin with.'

'Don't give me that social worker spiel. I'm absolutely forbidding you to tell anyone about this LeValet business, even to pass on the information anonymously. The man's got feelers everywhere, and far too much influence in Metropolis to make him harmless.'

He was at her side now, clutching her wrist, his flesh sweaty on hers.

'Promise you'll drop it, Saskia.'

It was the first time she'd seen Adrian genuinely apprehensive. It was a strange and slightly unnerving sight.

'All right,' she said unwillingly. 'Just stop bullying me.'

'Good girl,' he said.

He moved his hand from her wrist to her neck, caressing it clumsily, then abruptly pulled her up from her chair and kissed her again. His tongue invaded her mouth, salty and insistent.

'Let's go to bed,' he said thickly, already propelling her towards the bedroom door. She felt stifled by the scent of stale aftershave which clung to his skin, and tried to draw away as they entered the bedroom.

'What is it this time?' he asked, scanning her face. 'Not tired again? I never met a woman so hard to turn on.

Sometimes I think you ought to go to a shrink and get yourself sorted out.'

'You didn't have any complaints when we first went to bed. Perhaps you're the one who should see a shrink.'

Adrian smiled complacently.

'No, it wasn't bad at all then, was it? So come on, Saskia darling, and try to look a little more enthused.'

He turned towards the adjoining bathroom, already tugging off his tie, and she knew he was going to find one of the heavy ribbed condoms he firmly believed made him an even more effective lover. They actually made the process excruciating unless she was properly aroused, and that hadn't happened for weeks.

Swiftly she undressed, and slid naked between the monogrammed sheets. At least now she wouldn't have to endure the boring preliminaries while he undressed her. In any case she could never remember particularly enjoying them at any time.

She'd always been too concerned about pleasing Julian, her first lover at Cambridge, who wrote for *Granta* and virtually had a waiting list to sleep with him. Though he'd seemed so god-like when they met, and she'd been infatuated at first, she was almost relieved to be supplanted by one of the actresses from the Footlights Revue.

Later on she'd slipped into an affair with Neil, a veterinary student who combined the maximum of admiration with the minimum of finesse. But that had ended as well when she sensed he was becoming too serious about her. She didn't want to hurt him as she'd been hurt by Julian.

Sometimes she worried uneasily that she didn't seem able to form the sort of deep, lasting relationship that so many of her friends had embarked on by now. But she soon dismissed the thought by telling herself that commitment led to mortgages and babies. She'd seen too many women producers end promising careers that way.

Adrian padded out of the bathroom. He'd removed his trousers and pants, and was pulling off his shirt. In the dim light his legs gleamed pallidly like sticks of celery. His socks remained on. He was intensely self-conscious about his feet, which were flat and hammer-toed.

Swiftly he fell on her, enveloping yet impersonal. She felt like a sea creature she'd seen in a wildlife film being suffocated by an octopus as it was sucked into the stifling pulsating flesh. He buried his face in her neck, kissed her for approximately twenty seconds with the efficiency of an industrial vacuum cleaner, and began to fondle her breasts. His hand felt like a doctor's palpating for lumps.

Her passivity seemed to excite him, and for once he abandoned the usual two minutes of clitoral stimulation and thrust into her. The ribbed condom scorched like a skidding tyre. He hung over her, grunting, as he rammed his way in, and then finished off the act with a few bludgeoning thrusts.

Immediately he heaved himself off her and rolled over heavily by her side, falling at once into a sated stupor. Wordlessly Saskia turned her back on him, gazing bleakly out to the river through the floor-length window. The room was stifling, heated to a temperature capable of combating an Alaskan winter.

She longed to feel fresh air on her face, but the window was firmly locked. Another memory of Gilead came to her, of looking out of her bedroom window one spring evening on to a bed of hyacinths burning like blue jets of flame in a frame of clipped box hedge, their scent sweet and clean in the April air.

Slowly, prompted by thoughts of Gilead and the ever-present sense of being used by Adrian, she began to acknowledge to herself that somehow she'd lost her way, that the price of living with him had been a gradual erosion of her own self-worth.

Unreasoningly she longed to see Artemis, to be told what to do, to be soothed like a child again, and for the first time she allowed herself to contemplate fully the prospect of life without her. She pressed her hands over her eyes, and wept silently and painfully, for Artemis, for Gilead, and for her lost self.

Adrian was woken fifteen minutes later by the insistent bleep of the alarm on his watch. He'd set it to give him a reminder to watch a rival programme on ITV. His stomach gave a familiar twinge, and he thought that he really should heed the Metropolis doctor's warnings and not drink so much.

His mind wandered satisfactorily over a picture of his new production assistant, blonde Anthea, plump as an inviting pillow. He'd taken her out to lunch twice in Saskia's absence. She wasn't as bright as Saskia, but she was ambitious and flatteringly anxious to please. Maybe he'd ask her for a swim at his little-used health club tomorrow.

Saskia was coming out of the bathroom, wiping her eyes on a tissue. Odd, he thought to himself complacently, how good sex always made women cry. She looked forlorn and somehow infinitely desirable, in spite of her recent habit of opposing all his suggestions. There was a side to her he'd never been able fully to understand, an idealistic side which he continued to find challenging, and which he would have loved to be able to control.

She was wearing an old blue T-shirt which just covered the top of her thighs. Her bare feet were silent on the thick carpet.

'Why the hell do you keep wearing that ancient thing?' he said sleepily. 'I've told you before to go and get something decent from Harrods and put it on my account.'

He sat up and looked at his watch again. He'd have a

shower and shave, and Saskia could put some food in the microwave. They'd watch the programme while they ate. Her comments, always sharp and perceptive, would be useful to pass off as his own when he met the Controller tomorrow morning.

'Why don't you go and fix us something from the fridge?' he asked. 'The daily restocked it yesterday.'

She sat down, tugging on a pair of grey leggings. Her feet were slender, high arched with straight toes. Looking at her, her hair falling round her face, expression provokingly withdrawn, he wondered if he had time to get her into bed again.

Her cat, Svengali, a stand-offish creature which she'd insisted on bringing from her flat, gave him a baleful look and jumped up on the bed by her side. She began to stroke it, a tender absorbed expression on her face which she never showed him.

His stomach gave another twinge.

'For Christ's sake, what's so difficult about putting something in the microwave? And stop mauling that cat. You pay him more attention than me.'

She looked at him. Her eyelashes were still wet with tears. She gave him a cold stare and left the room. A moment later he heard her in the kitchen.

He swung his legs out of bed, telling himself he didn't give a damn as long as she got on with dinner.

'You can make some toast as well,' he called out. 'We'll try that jar of caviare the guy from Moscow TV gave me.'

They ate in silence, watching the film. Afterwards Adrian finished off the last scoop of caviare. He wiped his fingers contentedly on his napkin. Saskia had eaten very little, and sat with her legs tucked up under her, as aloof and self-contained as the cat. She'd hardly seemed to take in the film. He thought about going to his local

wine bar and joining his cronies there, but he couldn't be bothered. He poured himself another martini instead.

'Let's have a look at what you've done on the treatment so far,' he said. 'Then you can finish it later.'

Silently she unfolded herself, went to her briefcase, and handed it to him. He read with growing admiration.

'Not bad,' he said, 'but it'll cost a bomb in actor's fees if we do a full drama doc.'

'We could use voice-overs if you're worried about the cost, but it'd lose a lot of its impact. Anyway, you said I could have a bigger budget for this one.'

'We'll see. It's pretty strong stuff. I wonder if some of it isn't a little too disturbing. Don't forget it'll go out at prime slump viewing time. People don't want to be too wound up after their supper.'

'History ought to be disturbing,' said Saskia. 'You said originally that you wanted this series to be controversial.'

'That was before I got the Americans interested,' said Adrian smoothly. 'I really do wonder if they'd go for an uptight character like Hannah More. Maybe you could write in some kind of love interest for her, say an affair between her and this slave.'

'You sold the series originally to the Metropolis controllers as a thinking person's guide to history,' said Saskia angrily. 'Why talk down to the public? If you don't believe I can make this programme interesting while sticking to the truth, we might as well ditch the whole thing now.'

'You talk as if it's going to be watched exclusively by some academic committee. You're being over-sensitive. You've got to go with the flow sometimes.'

'I'm not going to trivialise the theme. You'll just have to trust me.'

'Don't forget I'm the one who carries the can if the ratings fall off.'

'There's been a steady rise in ratings lately,' said Saskia,

'and you're ready enough to take the praise. I've been meaning to talk to you about that. I must have my name billed properly as full producer this time. I don't mind your going on the credits as series editor, but that's the limit.'

Adrian sighed. It had been a decidedly unrestful evening so far.

'I was simply protecting you, darling,' he said. 'If the earlier programmes had flopped, think how hurt you'd have been.'

'But they didn't flop, and you knew they wouldn't. That's why you were so keen to get your name on them.'

Adrian moved uncomfortably in his chair.

'I'm going out,' he said. 'Perhaps you'll be in a better mood when I come back. And it'll give you a chance to work on the treatment. I must have it tomorrow.'

He waited for her to apologise, but she simply looked suspiciously like crying again, and went into the bedroom and banged the door behind her. She'd never lost her temper so thoroughly with him before, and he wondered briefly if there was some other reason. But tomorrow was going to be another a heavy day, and he couldn't be bothered to investigate her tantrums just now. He desperately needed to relax for an hour or two in undemanding company. He'd go to the wine bar after all.

Saskia woke early next morning to the sound of Sven mewing. Adrian had already gone, leaving an ashtray full of stubs and an empty coffee cup. She remembered he had a breakfast meeting with the Controller.

Weighted down by the ashtray was a brief, irritable note saying he definitely wanted some romance in the new script. He was watching some films the Americans had brought with them for the rest of the morning, and

he'd have a sandwich lunch in the viewing room. He didn't want to be disturbed, and he'd collect the revised treatment from the office afterwards.

She left the car at the flat and went to the Metropolis office on the tube, trying to ignore the crush of bodies round her, and thinking frantically of some way to thwart him. But it always came back to the same thing. She'd ultimately have to do as he wished because he had the last say over the budget.

There was none of her usual feeling of happy anticipation as she entered the building. Usually just to see its distinctive shape, a graceful dome of grey metal and black glass, gave her a buzz of excitement.

She was even less excited when she found that Anthea wasn't there to type the answers to a heap of urgent faxes. Instead she'd left a message saying she'd gone to take notes for Adrian at the viewing session.

Raging, Saskia dealt with the faxes herself, and then settled down to wrestle with the treatment. She refused to give Hannah More a lover – that would have been like trying to turn Edith Sitwell into a sex symbol – but to keep Adrian and the Americans quiet she wrote in a scene in the Calabar slave market, where women were paraded like prize heifers before their buyers. She knew the scene smacked of voyeurism, but somehow she'd find a way of dropping it when shooting began.

She waited for the word processor to print it out, making small groaning noises as though it too disapproved. By this time it was after two o'clock, and she decided to take it straight to Adrian. He hated to be disturbed when he was viewing, but she was in no mood to make any more concessions.

There was a suite of viewing rooms in the back of the building at basement level, ideally suited by the limited natural light. Each one was simply furnished

with a monitor, remote control equipment, and a few high-backed swivel armchairs.

She checked the number of Adrian's room from the bookings list, and took the lift downstairs, with the treatment tucked under her arm in a folder. Her mind was still half on the best way to develop the script.

A large cardboard sign saying 'Viewing in progress – strictly no entry' hung on the handle of Adrian's door. Saskia opened it quietly. A rank, foxy smell greeted her, mingled with some other scent, more cloying, which she couldn't quite place.

The room was lit by the flickering screen of the monitor, and a little light creeping round the edge of a closed venetian blind. On a side table stood a plate of half-eaten sandwiches, a bottle of wine and two glasses. A couple of chairs were set with their backs to her, but only one was occupied.

There was just enough light to see that a woman was sitting astride it, facing the door, with the upper part of her body concealed by the back of the chair. Her legs in pearl-coloured stockings were splayed apart, thighs pale and plump as a chicken's, her feet in high-heeled black shoes.

The chair was rocking energetically, and a crescendo of gasping male cries and ecstatic female shrieks rose from its depths, completely blotting out the sound of the monitor. Now Saskia recognised the musky perfume. It was Anthea's, and she knew the man beneath her in the chair must be Adrian.

Saskia crashed the door shut and slammed on the central light. A startled head and shoulders appeared round the back of the chair. Anthea's detergent blue eyes were huge with fright. Her blonde hair had fallen across her face, and strands clung to her lipstick. One opulent breast swung from her open blouse.

She gave a loud squeak, heaved herself backwards from the chair, tugging down her skirt and pulling the blouse together, and retreated towards the window. She stood there helplessly, mouth hanging open, looking like a landed fish.

There was more movement behind the chair and Adrian appeared, wrestling with the zip on his fly. His face was scarlet, and his carefully gelled hair fell untidily forward, revealing an uneven bald patch.

He grabbed the remote control and switched off the monitor. A frozen silence filled the room. Saskia tried to speak, but her voice seemed to have been strangled in her throat. Adrian advanced towards her.

'Don't look like that,' he said. 'It's not what you think, believe me, Saskia darling.'

He turned and hissed at Anthea, 'Beat it, there's a good girl. Take the rest of the day off, anything you like, but let me deal with this.'

She scuttled past them to the door, only pausing briefly to collect a pair of French knickers from the floor beneath the chair. When she'd gone Saskia's voice suddenly returned. It erupted in an odd mixture of shriek and croak.

'You bastard, Adrian! You double-dyed bastard! While I was pulling out all the stops to finish your treatment, you were pulling Anthea. Not only that, she left me to do her work as well.'

'For God's sake, keep your voice down,' he said, glancing nervously at the door. 'They'll hear you in the corridor. And lay off Anthea. It wasn't her fault.'

'That I do believe,' said Saskia, who was beginning to regain her self-possession slightly. 'I know just how you work. Did you make her an offer she couldn't refuse? The threat of a poor report when her next assessment comes up? Was that it?'

'If it's anyone's fault, it's yours,' said Adrian, tucking in his shirt impatiently. He put on his jacket, and began to comb back his hair. 'You're so damned cold in bed. And you know the kind of pressure I'm under at the moment. I must have some understanding.'

'There's only one kind of pressure you've been under, and that's Anthea,' Saskia shouted at him.

She found she was shaking with rage. Somehow she'd expected him to apologise, at least try to placate her a little. Adrian had always used attack as the best form of defence, but she'd stupidly never believed that one day she might be the object of that attack.

'Calm down, do.' He looked at his watch. 'Christ, I've got to meet the Americans in half an hour. I must have a chance to look at the treatment first.'

'That's all you ever think of,' Saskia stormed at him. 'Your bloody career. Everything and everyone else goes to the wall for it.'

'It's first for all of us, my darling, even you,' he said nastily. 'You were desperate to get out of children's TV when I met you. You didn't come and live with me just for my charm alone.'

'All right, I didn't,' she said, blushing angrily. 'But I did think you had some integrity. I know better now.'

'There's no need to be so dramatic about it. You're incredibly naive sometimes. This little incident with Anthea was just one of those passing things. She's been after me for ages. You know what these bimbos are like.'

'That's exactly the sort of word you would use about her. Don't demean her any more than you have already done.'

'Whose side are you on?' he said. He looked at his watch again. 'Come on, darling. Let's talk it about it later. Just let me have me the treatment, and I'll take you to the Quat' Saisons at the weekend to make up.'

His bland assumption that he could buy her off was the last straw. Her head felt as if it was full of helium. Furiously she picked up the empty bottle and swept at the wine glasses. They shattered against the screen of the monitor.

'Stuff the treatment, and stuff you!' she shrieked at him.

She tore the script in half, and then in quarters, and threw it at his feet.

Adrian went white. His face sagged.

'That was a bloody stupid thing to do. I just hope for your sake that you've a back-up disc available. You'll have to go straight back to the office and run off another copy. And that's an order. Don't forget you've got an assessment coming up too.'

'Don't try to bully me like you did Anthea. It won't work.'

She heard her voice rising again like a buzz saw. She hated him for making her lose control, and herself even more for allowing herself to be driven into such a situation. She'd humiliated him, but she'd humiliated herself as well, and if she obeyed him now she'd lose her last remaining shreds of integrity.

'You can write your own script,' she said. 'I'm moving out of your flat, and I'm leaving Metropolis.'

He laughed.

'Now you're being hysterical.'

'I mean it. I'm going, today.'

His smile began to fade.

'Stop over-reacting, Saskia. Don't be a fool. You'll kill your career.'

'Leaving you will be the most sensible thing I ever did,' she said furiously.

'But you can't go just like that,' he blustered. 'You've got a contract. You must honour it. I shall insist that you do.'

'You were the one who gave me a rotten deal in the first place. I wanted a permanent appointment, if you remember. That was when I thought you'd be the greatest person in the world to work for. But you insisted on a contract appointment – just a month's notice on either side. I didn't take any leave last summer, so Metropolis can have that instead of notice.'

'But I need you – we've got another four programmes to make. I haven't got the time to go scrabbling round for ideas. I rely on you for that. Be reasonable, please, darling.'

'I *am* being reasonable, for the first time in months.'

'You'll never get another job,' said Adrian viciously. 'I'll make damn' sure you never do.'

'Yes, you're great at character assassination, aren't you? But don't forget I know plenty about you too. I think the audit department would be more than interested if someone dropped a hint about your expenses.'

It was a shot in the dark, but a lucky one. Adrian stared at her, speechless at last. She marched towards the door, and delivered her parting shot.

'And get Anthea to help you with the script. I'm sure she'd love to write a sex scene for Hannah More!'

Strangely elated, and still propelled by fury, she threw her belongings from her desk into a carrier bag, typed a memo of resignation to the personnel department, and raged out of the building. Her one instinct was to get as far away from Adrian and Metropolis as possible.

She sat in the underground still in a daze of fury and reaction to the argument with him. Only when she came up into the open air did she begin to realise that she had to find somewhere to stay that night. And if she went to one of her London friends, Adrian would certainly discover where she was and badger her again.

She started to trudge towards the flat, worrying frantically about what to do, and when she was almost there remembered Morwenna's invitation. She'd love saying I told you so, but she was a doughty ally, and Adrian was too busy to come searching for her in Bristol. If she set out now she could be there by dark. It was the perfect bolt-hole.

She ran the last few yards to the flat, she was so eager to leave. Feverishly she packed her possessions into an assortment of cases and cardboard boxes, purposely leaving some tatty old dresses and track suits in the wardrobe to annoy Adrian and upset Anthea. The indignant Svengali yowled reproachfully from his travelling basket. As she went out of the front door for the last time she stopped to pick up the second post from the mat and push it into her pocket.

Once on the motorway she pushed the speed limit until every nut and bolt in the car rattled like castanets. She didn't start to calm down until she was well into Wiltshire. The trees were charcoal grey against a yellowish sky, and it had started to snow a little, dusting the downs like the surface of a sponge cake.

A deadly tiredness began to overtake her. Twice she almost lost her concentration, and eventually she stopped at a service station, and bought herself some coffee.

She looked round at the chatting, smiling occupants of the other tables, and decided they'd think her mad if they knew she'd just given up voluntarily her best and probably only hope of doing the work she loved, and made herself homeless into the bargain. To distract herself she took from her pocket the letter she'd picked up from the flat.

The long envelope was made of thick, expensive paper. She slit it with a knife, wondering idly what it contained. The letter she drew out was engraved at the head with the address of a firm of Bristol solicitors, Elder & Son. She

seemed to remember that they were the same solicitors who had helped her mother after her father's death. Incredulously she read the first paragraph:

> Dear Miss Tyrrell,
>
> You will probably know that your great-aunt, Dr Artemis Venner, died in Kenya a few days ago. By her will dated 19 February 1985 she appointed our firm executor, and bequeathed to you Gilead, her house in Clifton, and its contents, free from inheritance tax, together with the copyright of her published and unpublished works, and all her personal goods.

Chapter 4

The shock of inheriting Gilead was almost as great as the shock of Artemis's death. Even when Saskia had told Morwenna and Ben the news she could hardly believe it, and it still seemed unreal when she visited the offices of Elder & Son the next day.

She hadn't had many dealings with lawyers, except that she dimly recalled a grey, dour-faced man, the senior Mr Elder, talking to her mother about money at her father's funeral. As she entered the imposing doorway of the offices in Queen Square she automatically expected to encounter the Dickensian world of Gradgrind and Jarndyce.

But the interior of the Queen Anne house had been as thoroughly transformed as one of LeValet's buildings. It could have been any modern office. A secretary led her through yards of anonymous corridor hushed with beige carpeting. The room she was ushered into looked out over the square. A few children played there, heavily muffled against the cold.

The interior was as warm and reassuring as an incubator, discreetly furnished with a black ash desk bearing a battery of phones, shelves full of law reports, and some safe Victorian lithographs of city views. In one corner a coffee maker simmered. A bag of golf clubs was propped next to it.

The younger Mr Elder was in his mid-fifties, short and stout, with smooth pink skin reflecting the glow of a hundred Rotary club dinners. Greying curls like a slipped

halo fringed a shiny bald pate. He looked like Pigling Bland. Saskia almost expected to see trotters instead of feet as he came forward to greet her.

'Miss Tyrrell? I'm delighted to meet you. I'm only sorry my father isn't here, but he died a few years ago. He handled all your aunt's business until then. He had a great admiration for her. A most remarkable lady, and a great loss to ethnography.'

He spoke as though he had a mouth full of truffles. Saskia took his outstretched hand and they exchanged a few pleasantries. He skipped nimbly back behind his desk, and gestured to her to take the chair facing him.

She sat down and crossed her legs. She was wearing a suit of aubergine-coloured wool sashed with a soft leather belt. The skirt was very short, and unusually she was wearing high heels. They were necessary to bolster her confidence, in spite of Morwenna's acid inquiry as to why she felt it necessary to pander to gender-stereotyping.

After a hasty glance at her legs Mr Elder meticulously began to sort through a pile of papers and ultimately produced a long typewritten document. Saskia, with a disconcerting jolt of recognition, saw Artemis's flowing signature at the foot of the last page.

'Naturally I'll give you a copy of the will for your own perusal,' he said, 'but I'll just acquaint you with the main points now. After the payment of death duties and some minor legacies, Dr Venner left half her capital in trust to be used on behalf of the African community with whom she spent her last years. The remaining capital, about two hundred thousand pounds, was left to your mother Laura. As I told you in my letter, the house in Clifton and all her belongings have been left to you.'

Though Saskia kept reminding herself that she was an heiress the whole situation still seemed almost dreamlike, as if she were acting out a scene in an old B movie.

'How long will it take you get probate?' she asked, hoping she sounded less bewildered than she felt.

'About two months if we're lucky. But of course you may inspect the house at any time. I have the keys here.'

Perhaps if she saw the house she would begin to take in properly what had happened. Better still, she might recapture a little of Artemis's reassuring presence.

'Could I go today?'

'An excellent idea. You need to get some idea of the present condition of the place before you decide whether to sell. But I should strongly advise it. The house would fetch a tidy sum, even in today's market.'

Saskia stared at him. Selling Gilead was something that had never entered her mind, though she had no idea how she could afford to maintain it.

Mr Elder felt a twinge of satisfaction. For such a young woman she'd been remarkably self-contained so far. His younger female clients – not that many came his way, since his junior partner liked to appropriate them – were usually glad of his guidance.

'You should consider it very seriously,' he said. 'It would really be the most sensible thing to do. After all, it's an enormous house for one person to live in alone. Alternatively you could consider renting to a commercial firm, but you'd have to refurbish the interior first.'

Her abstracted look suddenly vanished. She tilted her chin, and her eyes shone. She now looked remarkably like her great-aunt, he thought.

'I couldn't allow Gilead to be altered in any way,' she said. 'It was the only house Artemis ever owned. She wrote up all her work there. It was her refuge, and a sort of power house as well. Artemis without Gilead would have been like – like the Wordsworths without Dove Cottage.'

He smiled indulgently.

'I'm not particularly well up in literature, Miss Tyrrell, but that does seem to overstate the case a little.'

'I don't think so,' she returned coldly. 'Everyone acknowledges that Artemis was one of the foremost women of her generation. Because of that it's important to keep Gilead exactly as it is.'

'But my dear young lady, you have to be realistic. The cost of maintenance and insurance alone is huge. There are eight acres of garden, at least twelve rooms, and it's an ageing property into the bargain. I'm only reminding you of this for your own good. The expenses could become a nightmare. After all, your great-aunt didn't leave you any capital for its upkeep. But perhaps your mother would consider helping you.'

'My mother never felt about Gilead as I do,' she said. 'And I'm sure she has even less interest in it since she remarried and went to live abroad.'

He looked at her curiously. It was odd for a girl of her age to speak in such a bitter tone of her mother. He remembered Laura Tyrrell as a charming woman: somewhat indecisive and helpless, perhaps, but that was to be expected in a young widow.

'Investments would be much easier to look after, and we'd be only too glad to help you establish a portfolio. Your great-aunt wouldn't have wanted you to struggle single-handed with such a large responsibility. She was always extremely fond of you.'

She smiled at him then for the first time, a smile so attractive that his stomach gave a distinct lurch. He wondered uneasily if he'd had too many oysters for lunch.

'It's also because she was so fond of me that I don't want to give up Gilead,' she said. Then she reverted to her former brisk tone. 'All right, I'll bear in mind what you've said, Mr Elder, but I must come to my own decision.'

He gave up. Let her see the house, and then no doubt

she'd be back in a couple of hours eager for his advice about putting it on the market. She obviously wasn't going to be moved by arguments alone.

He folded the will carefully and put it in a long brown envelope, which he handed to her together with a neatly labelled bunch of keys.

'Here you are, then, my dear. Look at the house and read the will at your leisure. If you return the keys to me later today we can discuss the matter again. Since the caretakers left we've had to employ a security guard at the house – that's one of the many expenses – but he's just gone down with flu, and there won't be a replacement until this afternoon. You'll be able to look round uninterrupted. I feel sure you'll think twice about the house when you see what the upkeep entails.'

It was easy for an ordinary passer-by to miss Gilead. It fronted one of the side roads below the great curve of Royal York Crescent, and was hidden by a fifteen-foot-high stone wall. Above it all that could be seen of the house was a collection of soaring chimneys, tall and distinctive as the red buttes of the Colorado desert, each set at a different angle to the others, and made of weathered russet bricks.

Saskia fumbled under the folds of her heavy fringed wrap for the keys, and with cold hands unlocked the door that led from the pavement into the entrance court. It had always been open in Artemis's day, but Gilead could, if its owner wished, become a fortress.

The courtyard was laid with brick. Strands of withered grass poked up between the cracks. There had been a heavy hoar frost the previous night, and straggling climbing roses hung from the enclosing walls like untidy grey hair powdered with glitter-dust. Frost rimed the leaves choking a small circular pool in the centre of the

yard, and silvered the head and shoulders of a statue of Syrinx.

The house itself was built of golden Bath stone, with many-paned mullioned windows and sweeping roofs of handmade tiles. A huge oriel bay window, part of the hall and upper gallery, rose to the roof, marking Gilead as Lutyens's handiwork as distinctively as the tall chimneys and the low windows running beneath the overhanging eaves.

Saskia stood briefly at the top of the shallow semi-circular steps leading to the front door, steeling herself for the moment when she'd push it open and walk into the hall, and finally have to accept that Artemis wasn't there any more.

She remembered the first time she'd pushed that door open into the same hall, at the end of the terrible year in which her father had died. Her mother, pretty scatter-brained Laura, had withdrawn from everyone, including her small daughter. Saskia, who'd up till then been accustomed to her mother's warm, unstinting love, had learned slowly and painfully to endure life without it as well as without her father.

She went on enduring when her mother's grief turned to a relentless, brittle socialising, and only finally began to resent her when she most inexplicably of all married correct, undemonstrative Ralph Smythe, and went back with him to the British Embassy in South America where he was first secretary. It was then that Laura told Saskia she was going to boarding school, and would spend most of her school holidays with her unknown great-aunt Artemis.

Saskia had walked apprehensively into the great entrance hall at Gilead, dressed in the school overcoat which was so old-fashioned that people stared at her in the train. A cleaning lady who'd answered the door with a check

duster draped over her shoulder bustled away to fetch Artemis.

Saskia looked about her. The oak-panelled walls rippled with linen fold carving. A heap of logs crackled in the hearth, above which ran a motto carved in stone. The wooden floor gleamed darkly like water under a bridge. It reflected the lights of a Christmas tree standing on one side of the stairway, decorated with scarlet wax candles which had been lighted and were flickering among the resiny green branches. On the other side was a life-sized ebony statue of a naked black woman with shining limbs and a dreaming face. Someone had wound a necklace of mistletoe round her neck, so that the berries looked like pearls.

She finally tore her gaze from the statue to find a woman carrying a basket of winter jasmine watching her from the back of the hall. She wore an indigo caftan with scrolled embroidery round the neck, and a rope of amber beads. White hair was piled untidily above a bony, amused face. Her eyes, deep brown, returned Saskia's gaze with equal interest.

'So you're Saskia,' she said. Her face came alight with a huge impulsive smile. '"I met a lady in the meads, full beautiful, a faery's child,"' she quoted.

Saskia, who would normally have been acutely embarrassed at such a greeting, for she was at the stage where her body felt as if it didn't fit properly, had just discovered Keats and revered him equally with Paul Simon. She forgot her self-consciousness in her pleasure at capping the quotation.

'"Her hair was long, her foot was light, and her eyes were wild." But I'm not beautiful and my eyes aren't wild,' she added indignantly.

'Not completely beautiful yet, but you soon will be,' said Artemis. 'And I never said your eyes were wild.

That was Mr Keats speaking. He had a difficult time with women.'

She hugged Saskia, enveloping her in a mixture of sandalwood scent and some foreign tobacco.

'Welcome to Gilead. Do you know why it's called that?'

'It's in the Bible,' said Saskia hesitantly, dredging through the interminable religious knowledge lessons inflicted on them at school. She hoped this quiz wasn't going to last too long. She was ravenous after the journey, and a wonderful smell of baking cakes was now joining the other scents in the room. 'Isn't it in Jeremiah? Something about balm in Gilead, but I don't remember where that was.'

'A dismal man, Jeremiah,' said Artemis. 'Never take his advice. Gilead was a holy place. The Israelites went there to regain strength after battle. The balm was a special sort of healing resin collected from the trees, but it was a spiritual balm as well. That's something we don't know much about today, though the Africans still understand it. So why do you think this house is called Gilead?'

Standing there in the warmth and the light, with the statue gazing benignly at her, Saskia had answered immediately: 'Because it's that sort of place too.'

Artemis smiled again.

'So you understand already. It was designed for my uncle, who left it to me, by a great architect called Ned Lutyens. He meant it to be a refuge in the heart of the city, a place where you could become yourself. Welcome home, Saskia.'

She put down the basket and held out her arms.

It had seemed to Saskia that from that moment of being embraced in the hall by Artemis she'd first begun to live again. But now the winter jasmine above the doorway was blackened with frost. She was about to enter the

hall once more, no longer a child, and find nothing but emptiness.

The clash of metal on stone brought her abruptly back to the present. She'd dropped the keys on the steps. A robin pecking among the jasmine's roots flew up to a window ledge, looking at her with eyes like elderberries. She retrieved the keys, found the right one, and fitted it into the lock. She took a deep breath and stepped into the entrance hall.

There was no fire in the hearth. The air was stuffy and cold, and a relentless white light poured in through the oriel window. But the smell was the same, a scent of beeswaxed wood and the legacy of the shallow bowls of pot pourri that had always stood on the window sills. And through all these scents she was sure she could detect a very faint trace of Artemis's own sandalwood perfume.

This unnerved her more than anything. It intensified the terrible feeling of emptiness, as if all the life had departed from the house forever. She sat down on a carved Zanzibar chest. A huge wave of grief swept over her, a mixture of longing for Artemis and despair over the muddle her own life was in, a muddle which Artemis could never now help her to solve.

She wanted to cry but couldn't. For a long time she sat there in frozen misery, until eventually she became so cold that she had to move. She got up and went over to the stairs. The African statue at least was still there, filmed with dust but smiling serenely as she had always done. Saskia polished its head with a corner of her wrap. The wood sprang to gleaming life. The curved brow, somehow retaining the essence of the living tree, felt warm beneath her hand.

Saskia took a deep breath and walked through the hall into the drawing room, which had a series of French windows opening on to a long terrace and the garden.

Above the wide fireplace a mosaic mural stretched the length of the wall, showing the return of Persephone from the underworld, hair unbound, in a delphinium blue robe, scattering flowers by the banks of a stream.

Nothing had changed. The heavy comfortable sofas, set at right angles to the fireplace, with faded Kelim runners in wallflower colours flung over their backs, were ready for guests. Artemis still looked down from her portrait by Laura Knight, her arms and shoulders swathed in her scarlet Somali shawl, her eyes shrewd and sympathetic and almost alive.

It was the same throughout the rest of the house. Everything bore the unmistakable stamp of Artemis's personality: the huge oak-beamed gallery above the stairs which housed her ethnographic collection, the old-fashioned bedrooms with high wooden bedsteads and white honeycombed cotton counterpanes, the splendid bathroom with its Persian-tiled walls and deep claw-footed bath.

Even the kitchen was unaltered, dominated by an ancient Esse solid fuel stove which ran the heating system and had been used to bake bread in Artemis's day, and a gas cooker at least forty years old, with brass taps and an immense grid above the burners for warming plates. The dark room too was just as Artemis had left it, as though she might at any minute start to use it again.

Saskia returned to the drawing room, feeling as if she'd made a tour of her past. She sat down on one of the sofas. Her final acceptance of Artemis's death was being joined by an even fiercer longing to keep Gilead, and a scaring realisation of just how much money she'd need to maintain it.

She was so deep in thought that at first she hardly heard an insistent tapping sound. When it did register she dismissed it as a bird or a branch against the window, but eventually the noise became impossible to ignore.

She twisted round in her seat and saw an elderly woman, one hand supporting an ancient upright bicycle with a skirt guard on the back wheel, beckoning energetically to her through the glass.

After a moment's hesitation Saskia went over to the French window. She wrestled with the rusty lock and threw it open.

The woman must have been in her late-seventies, but she was still upright. She had faded blue eyes, hooded in tortoise-like folds. Strands of grey hair escaped from beneath a flat-topped *muhejjadin* hat.

'What exactly are you doing here, young woman?' she asked crisply. 'This is private property. I suppose that wretched security guard has a hangover yet again.'

Her accent, clipped, with drawling 'o's and flattened short 'e's, Saskia summed up as Girton, circa 1930. Her brown army overcoat looked like a relic from the Second World War. She wore black wool stockings, and a pair of short zipped sheepskin boots.

Saskia was startled into telling the truth.

'I'm Artemis Venner's great-niece. I've inherited Gilead. I was just looking around.'

The old lady quizzed her again.

'Her great-niece? Are you sure? Then tell me your name.'

'Saskia, Saskia Tyrrell.'

The old lady propped her bike carefully against an empty stone urn.

'Ah, yes, I remember Artemis talking about you, of course,' she said, 'but I don't think I've ever met you before. I worked abroad as a teacher in India for many years. I only saw Artemis when our spells at home coincided. We were at Cambridge together.'

'How did you get in?' asked Saskia, still adjusting to her sudden appearance.

'Just before she went back to Africa she gave me a key to the garden door so that I could come and go as I wanted. She knew how much I loved it. I used to think about it often in India, especially in the dry season.'

She held out a hand in a red mitten.

'Alicia Moxon. I'm delighted to meet you at last. Artemis was very fond of you. You're a lucky young woman to have inherited Gilead.'

Her hand was extremely cold, and the fingertips were blue.

'Please do come in,' said Saskia, hoping she wasn't going to collapse with hypothermia on the threshhold. 'Is it Miss or Mrs Moxon?'

'Miss of course. I detest this mealy-mouthed Ms you young girls seem to like so much, and the way people use one's Christian name so freely these days. But you may call me Alicia, since I do feel that we are already friends through Artemis.'

'Thank you,' murmured Saskia, trying not to smile.

Miss Moxon stepped briskly inside, looking around her with quick darting glances.

'I haven't been in here for many years, but I'm glad to see it's not changed.'

'Please sit down,' said Saskia. 'I'm sorry the room's so chilly.'

'Artemis always had enormous fires,' said Miss Moxon. 'I expect you remember them. She was a great catalyst in every sense, the sort of person who warmed people's lives.'

'I know,' said Saskia bleakly.

Miss Moxon gave her a sharp look.

'I've some cocoa in my bicycle basket,' she said. 'Would you mind fetching it for me? It's in a string bag.'

When Saskia returned with the bag Miss Moxon had subsided on to one of the sofas, and was taking off her boots.

'Don't want to spread too much dirt about,' she said.

Saskia watched, fascinated, as she revealed her stockinged feet. Her big toes poked out from large holes in the black wool.

Miss Moxon caught her glance.

'Darning's such a bore when there are so many better things to do,' she said.

She pulled off her hat. A thick plait was firmly skewered to her head with several bristling hairpins. Under her army coat she wore a yellowing and felted Aran sweater, and a heavy tweed skirt. She extracted the flask and a small biscuit tin from the bag, together with two porcelain mugs wrapped in a tea towel.

'I always carry a spare mug for friends,' she said. 'I dislike drinking out of plastic – so uncivilised.'

She filled the mugs and levered the lid off the tin. The biscuits inside were buttery and melted in delicious fragments on the tongue. Together with the cocoa they had the comforting effect of nursery food.

'Why are you here today?' Saskia asked. 'There can't be many flowers about at the moment.'

'For the camellias, of course. Surely you remember the orangery? Your great-aunt had a magnificent collection in there. I keep an eye on them in the winter. The man who comes to tidy the garden once a week is a complete vandal. I keep an eye on him too.'

'It sounds a lot for you to do.'

'It's a privilege,' said Miss Moxon. 'This was one of the great gardens of the West Country. I expect you know it was designed by Gertrude Jekyll, a wonderful woman. I met her here once. A sturdy little creature, looked just like a wren and wore navvy's boots. You've inherited a great responsibility, my dear. The garden must be restored before it's too late. Of course I'll hand over my key willingly now that I know Gilead is in your care.'

'I shouldn't dream of it,' said Saskia impulsively. 'I'd like you to continue coming here for as long as possible. But I must warn you, Miss Moxon – Alicia, I mean – that Artemis's solicitor has advised me to sell Gilead. It's the last thing I want to do, but I may have to.'

'Sell Gilead!' Miss Moxon looked at her in outrage. 'But it's a monument to Artemis and her work. Why should you sell? You're young and strong. You'll cope.'

'I've no money to keep it up,' said Saskia, 'and I've my own work to do as well.'

'And what is that, may I ask? I remember Artemis writing to me that you'd got a place at Cambridge. Do you teach?'

'I make television films, historical documentaries. I was working for one of the London companies until recently.'

'Oh, television,' said Miss Moxon in a tone of utmost contempt. 'I'm surprised, my dear, that you could devote a first-class education to such a career. I don't have a set myself. I prefer to read. But when I do see one I often find that even the programmes on serious subjects distort the truth. Television's far too emotive as well. At least with the printed page you can go back and test the hypotheses at your leisure.'

They were arguments Saskia had heard many times before.

'I agree that television ought to be accurate, but you need drama to catch the attention. People don't want to be lectured all the time. Lots of them have such difficult lives that television's their only relief.'

'What an indictment of our age, if that's their sole outlet.'

'The fascination for me lies in making history exciting yet keeping to the truth at the same time.'

'I've never seen a programme like that,' answered Miss Moxon disbelievingly.

'But you said yourself that you don't watch very much. I think you'll have to accept that television's here to stay.' Saskia couldn't resist teasing Miss Moxon a little. 'So don't you think I ought to try to make the best programmes possible?'

They wrangled for a few more minutes. Miss Moxon might be elderly but she was a ferocious debater, and Saskia only just held her own.

'Well,' said Miss Moxon, replacing the lid of the tin with a snap, 'I enjoyed that little discussion. And now I must be getting on. I've several friends to visit before luncheon. Poor dears, they can't get about as I do, and they depend on me for a bit of conversation.'

She bent down to pull on her boots. The bones in her spine cracked loudly.

'I shall call to see you when you're established here,' she said, finally straightening up. 'No doubt you'll be glad of a little advice about the garden.'

'You really shouldn't count on my coming to live in Gilead,' said Saskia.

'A defeatist attitude is not what I'd expect from Artemis's great-niece,' said Miss Moxon severely.

Saskia helped her into her coat. Miss Moxon clamped her hat firmly down over her ears, and picked up the string bag.

'I'll come with you to the side gate,' said Saskia. 'I haven't looked at the garden yet.'

They stepped out on to the terrace. A cedar of Lebanon, black against the heavy frost, spread its branches across one side of the house. Everything was locked in the cold of deep winter.

The sunken plat beyond the terrace, big as several tennis courts, was bisected by a long stone-edged rill, into which water should have streamed from a head wall shaped like the inside of a huge shell. In the summer the water in the

pool below it reflected back in shifting patches of light, but now all was grey. A pergola defined the far edge of the plat. Beyond that was an orchard, and further off still a boundary wall where the land sloped away towards the gorge.

They turned left away from the plat and into a series of enclosed gardens, like outdoor rooms, edged with untidy yew and box hedges. From there they passed into a long walk headed by two magnificent Judas trees so rimed with frost that they looked like silver tents.

Beyond them was the orangery, half conservatory, half outdoor drawing room. Behind the barrier of glass waxen camellias, pink and blood red and a curious greenish white, were set against banks of exotic greenery behind which rose a jungle of tree ferns and palms, and the orange trees themselves. In the midst of the flowers was a tiled space dotted with white cast-iron chairs and tables. Above it all the roof girders, of more white-painted iron, spread like the ribs of a huge parasol. Outside, flanking the entrance, were two long beechwood seats, designed, like everything else, by Lutyens, which looked over a paved courtyard overhung by a walnut tree.

'Temperamental plants, camellias,' said Miss Moxon. 'It's surprising that they do so well without any heat, but it's a warm aspect, and very sheltered.'

Once past the orangery they came to a small door with flaking green paint set in the wall. Miss Moxon paused, and propped up her bike.

'Hold my coat for a moment, will you? I want to check on something.'

There was an ancient espaliered apple against the wall, gnarled branches stretching out on either side like the steps of a rustic ladder. Miss Moxon tucked up her skirt into the leg elastic of a pair of pink Celanese bloomers, and began to climb determinedly to the top of the wall.

She clung there for a moment, swaying as she looked over, thin black legs wedged precariously among the branches.

'Just as I thought,' she shouted down triumphantly. 'LeValet again!'

She made her way carefully to the ground, shook out her skirt, and brushed some pieces of moss from her fingers.

'What about LeValet?' Saskia demanded, helping Miss Moxon back into her coat.

'There's a large stretch of derelict land on the other side of Gilead's boundary wall. It's been like that for several years, but it was put up for sale recently. Go and see for yourself.'

Saskia grappled her way to the top of the wall, nearly laddering her tights, and considerably hampered by her high-heeled shoes. She wondered how Miss Moxon had managed. She peered over. There were a few mature trees, but most of the site was covered with brambles and elder. In the middle was a large hoarding. The foot-high scarlet lettering, still fresh, announced: 'Acquired for development by LeValet holdings'.

'I suppose you have heard of LeValet?' said Miss Moxon, taking hold of her bicycle again after Saskia had clambered down.

'Everyone's been telling me about him recently.'

'Then you'll know that there's even more reason now for you to live at Gilead. You'll need to keep an eye on LeValet. The man's a menace. He's ruined some of the finest old houses in Bristol. He'll have some architectural monstrosity on that land in a trice, and then pack it with miserable old people too fuddled to look after themselves.'

She produced a key, and unlocked the side gate.

'I've got friends in his Clifton Happy Valley home,' she said. 'What an ironic name! They're too scared to complain, given the minimum of care, and regimented to death. It's a disgrace.'

She flung her leg over the saddle.

'So it's up to you now, my dear. But I'll keep an eye on the place for you until you move in.'

Saskia stood for a moment watching her cycle down the road, her coat flapping round her legs, and the bell ringing vigorously. When she went back into the garden and relocked the door, it seemed even more desolate without Miss Moxon. To her left lay the old stables which Artemis had converted into garages, and some garden sheds, but she didn't have the heart to explore any further.

Yet as she walked slowly back through the silent garden her photographer's eye was constantly caught by the stark beauty of the landscaping in the frost. She couldn't resist taking out her Rollei and photographing a birch hanging over a flight of steps. The frost had melted on the branches, then frozen into ice drops. The long drooping twigs tinkled like a wind mobile as she brushed them aside.

The cold striking up through her flimsy shoes drove her back into the house. Once inside again the feeling of coming home was overpowering. Yet as she'd walked through the garden trying to think of ways of keeping Gilead, she'd been forced unwillingly to acknowledge that perhaps Mr Elder was right. The antiquated central heating system would require lorryloads of coke to keep the house even slightly warm. The whole place needed painting, and even if she were able to afford that there was still the question of insurance and security.

The African goddess seemed to stare at her hopefully as she opened the front door. She locked it firmly behind her, and crossed the courtyard to the outer door. A brief burst of sunshine had released a waft of wintersweet. The robin was bustling about among the frozen leaves. When she went out into the street the sense of returning to another, harsher world was almost shocking.

* * *

Still thinking about Gilead and what to do with it, she began to walk up through the village, intending to have lunch at a pub where she'd sometimes drunk draught cider with Artemis. Almost without noticing how she'd got there she found herself on the edge of the downs, the elegant Regency sweep of Sion Hill with its canopied wrought-iron balconies stretching round to her left.

While she stood trying to remember the exact location of the pub, the bridge forced itself on her eye. It hung, starkly black against the colourless sky, like a curtain of black lace suspended from the great curve of chains.

She began to take more photographs with the Rollei, approaching closer and closer and forcing herself not to think of the drop beneath the bridge in her determination to capture the scene. A light mist had rolled up the gorge with the incoming tide, filling it with cotton wool rolls of vapour, and blotting out the drop below.

Cautiously, testing her courage like a skater testing ice, she walked out past the toll-keeper's booth and the first suspension tower, to the point where the bridge left the land. She began to take shot after shot of Clifton apparently floating in a sea of mist.

For a few glorious moments she was sure her fear of heights had gone, that she'd finally outgrown it. Then an unexpected scurry of wind parted the mist. The sun emerged briefly. Two hundred and fifty feet below she saw the cold, oily waters of the Avon flowing between high banks of mud, shifting and deepening treacherously beneath her.

She hardly noticed the tug of the Rollei as it fell from her grasp and was caught by the strap round her neck. She clung desperately to the parapet. As usual she was paralysed by fear, sick and giddy, terrified by the drop, yet in a horrible way hypnotically drawn to it.

She saw in her mind her father's face, eyes staring

blankly through the shattered windscreen of the car, blood trickling down his neck, and the steering wheel rammed into his chest. The car was half suspended over the edge of the cliff, still rocking gently, the waves crawling beneath her, and he never answered her screams for help, so that she knew he was dead, and that she was going to drown in the sea below and in her own grief.

A barge laden with timber hooted mournfully as it went under the bridge towards Avonmouth. It seemed to be calling her. And then, through a haze of terror in which nothing was real except the water below, she felt a hand on her arm. Hardly able to breathe, half suffocated by panic, she slowly turned her head away from the drop. A man was staring at her, his untidy dark hair beaded with mist.

'Saskia Tyrrell, isn't it? We met at The Watershed.'

His voice was vaguely familiar. Slowly, almost dreamily, she lifted her hands from the parapet, turning the palms towards her. They were scored with purple weals. Hastily she thrust them into her pockets, and focused on him again.

He was wearing a shabby brown leather jacket, and had a Nikon slung round his neck. She groped for his name, struggling to pull herself together.

'Yes, of course I remember you. Munro Hawkshaw.'

He was the last person she'd have wanted to witness her terror. She wondered exactly how much he'd seen or guessed.

'It's an interesting light today,' she managed to say nonchalantly, though her voice sounded thin and unsteady. 'I couldn't resist taking a few shots.'

She nodded coolly at him, and started to walk back towards the downs and safety, keeping her eyes firmly averted from the water. To her annoyance he ignored the hint and fell in beside her. His self-confidence irritated her still more.

'Are you all right?' he asked. 'I thought perhaps you weren't well.'

'Of course I'm all right,' she snapped back. 'Just a little cold, that's all.'

'Artemis's death must have been a great shock to you. It's almost impossible to realise she's dead.'

As usual the attack of panic had left her drained of energy. And now she'd have the extra burden of going through all the meaningless rigmarole of commiseration, though at least it would divert him from her behaviour on the bridge.

'I can cope,' she said stonily. 'I hadn't seen her for ages anyway.'

They walked on in silence. She increased her stride, but it was difficult to walk fast in the high heels on unsteady legs. She had to get rid of him. Deliberately she made a sudden dash across the road, almost getting mown down by a learner driver. But as she stepped on to the opposite pavement he appeared by her side again.

'How about a drink?' he asked.

They were standing by a pub, and before she could protest he'd taken her arm and steered her inside.

The warmth and sheer ordinariness of the saloon bar was unexpectedly reassuring. There was a strong smell of draught ale and cigarettes. A large engraved mirror ran behind the bar, reflecting bottles of spirits. The bar top was mahogany, and had a long brass footrail. He steered her to a seat in a plush-lined alcove.

'What'll you have?' he asked. 'Wine, a spritzer? Or would you like brandy?'

'Coffee,' she said firmly. She wasn't going to let him dictate her drink as well.

Munro went to the bar and ordered coffee with a measure of brandy and a large whisky for himself. He looked back to the corner where Saskia was sitting. She'd

taken off her wrap, but there was something defensive about the way she sat, in spite of her efforts to make him think otherwise.

He wasn't quite sure why he'd manoeuvred her into the pub, except that over the last few years he'd become an expert in the recognition of fear. The intense quality of her terror on the bridge had alerted his journalist's sixth sense and made him automatically curious about her.

She wasn't the sort of woman who usually interested him. He disliked scratchy feminists. Except that now he thought about it, she hadn't been the feminist. That was her friend. He remembered though that she'd made some pertinent remarks about the invasion of privacy which had been a bit too close for comfort.

It had been an odd day for him altogether, so far. He normally avoided visiting the city, but the bizarre patterns etched on to the countryside by the heavy frost had made him curious to see its effect on an urban landscape.

It was unusual for him to feel motivated to do anything since Sabah had died in the Tigrean capture of Addis Ababa. He'd finished his assignment then almost automatically, and wandered in an aimless sort of way around East Africa until he ended up in Artemis's village and regained some sort of balance there. It was even odder that this girl was her great-niece.

Back in England after a severe bout of malaria, he'd gone to earth in the ramshackle farmhouse he'd bought himself in the calm and undramatic Vale of Severn. Occasionally Dan, his agent, chivvied him into attending an exhibition, but had given up offering him new assignments. The latest book of photos was doing well, and he could afford to lie low for a few more months while he decided what to do with the rest of his life.

He looked at his watch, an old Rolex which had seen his father through the Korean War. Two-thirty. He realised

he'd had nothing to eat, and neither had Saskia by the look of it. He ordered a plate of sandwiches as well.

When he got back to her with the drinks she was looking more composed. She had the most remarkable skin, like the inside of a frangipani petal. She frowned when she saw the sandwiches. Her brows were dark and level over curious grey amber-flecked eyes.

'I'm not hungry,' she said.

'Well, I am. I was hanging about waiting for the light to change for about an hour, and I'm not used to this dismal climate yet.'

She sipped the coffee and looked at him accusingly as she tasted the brandy.

'Why do you stay here, then?' she asked. 'Why not go back to those wars you love so much?'

He sensed that she was still upset by whatever had happened to her on the bridge, but this continued antagonism was beginning to turn him off, as so many things did too easily these days. The cold, deadly emotional fatigue which had afflicted him most of the time since he'd found Sabah's body was settling over him again like a leaden blanket, and the only thing to move it would be half a bottle of whisky, and sleep. He couldn't be bothered to be polite any more.

'I don't go back because Sabah, my girlfriend, died in Ethiopia nine months ago, and I've a big enough battle on my hands getting over that.'

As soon as he'd said the words he was astonished by them. It was the first time he'd admitted to anyone apart from Artemis how much he missed Sabah. He couldn't think why he'd told this girl. She was far too young to have any knowledge of the extreme depths of grief.

Her skin flooded with scarlet.

'I'm so sorry,' she said in a low voice. 'Morwenna did tell me at the exhibition, but I forgot.'

'It's all right,' he said bleakly. 'Anyway, people being sorry only make it worse.'

'So I can't win,' she said with the ghost of a smile. As if to make amends she began to eat a sandwich.

'Why are you still in Bristol?' he asked. 'I thought you worked in London. At Metropolis, wasn't it?'

'I left,' she said, in a voice which discouraged further discussion. 'I've been staying here with Morwenna. And now I'm having to decide what to do with Gilead.'

'Gilead?' he asked. He searched in his memory. The name had a vaguely biblical ring. Perhaps he'd heard it at the chapel services he'd been dragged to by his non-conformist grandmother.

'Gilead's a house here in Clifton. It was Artemis's home from the late-thirties, when she wasn't abroad. She was left it by an uncle. It was built by Lutyens.'

'I remember now. She did tell me something about it. Quite a legacy. What do you think you'll do with it? Sell?'

'Artemis's solicitor thinks I should. I've no money for its upkeep now I've left Metropolis.'

'What possessed you to work for that bunch of charlatans in the first place?' he asked.

She frowned again. 'They're not all like that. Besides, I was desperate to get started. You probably don't know how difficult that is these days. You began in the seventies, when everything was easy.'

'Not so easy even then. I did a geology degree at Leeds, and my parents wanted me to work for one of the oil companies.'

'So how did you get into photo-journalism?'

'I'd always been interested in photography, and I had some luck with freelance articles at college.'

'So you were fortunate from the beginning,' she said.

'Not really. Getting a paid assignment was a different

matter entirely. I worked for an oil company for a couple of years, and saved enough to buy some decent cameras and equipment. One of the big nationals took me on as a stringer in Angola, but I had to pay my own fare and expenses at first.'

'Angola.' She shivered. 'Why did you choose a place like that?'

He pushed his hands into his pockets while he considered what to tell her. She'd probably disapprove, whatever he said.

'I'd always wanted to go to Africa, and that was the most newsworthy place at the time. I thought it'd be exciting, and there was just a chance that if I took a few risks I'd get some unique shots.'

'So you really didn't think about the ethics of war at all,' she said triumphantly. 'It was just sheer opportunism.'

'The same as your motive when you went to Metropolis. You've just said so.'

'I wasn't watching people kill each other.'

'There are more subtle kinds of death,' he answered. 'The death of truth for instance. I gather that's not very important at Metropolis.'

'I've already told you that not everyone there works in the same way as Adrian,' she said. 'You can't tar us all with the same brush.'

'So you do recognise that his methods are somewhat suspect, to say the least? Have you heard of our local hero, LeValet, who owns a good slice of its shares?'

She looked defensive.

'I hadn't when I first went to Metropolis. I was only told about him recently. But I know all about his Happy Valley Homes now.'

'I don't suppose you've heard of his other big racket. I came across it in Africa. He goes in for drug deals. Not hard drugs – he's too clever for that. He buys up

consignments of expired penicillin and so on, and flogs them off to the third world. I tried to do an exposé on it once, but it's almost impossible to get anyone to give evidence against him.'

She was quiet for a moment, as if she was deciding whether to tell him something. Then she said: 'I've just found out that he's bought some land next to Gilead.'

'Has he indeed?' said Munro. 'Then perhaps you'd better sell. He's too big a shark for you to deal with, and he's the last person to have as a neighbour.'

'I can take care of myself,' she said shortly.

She'd drunk the coffee, and half the sandwiches were gone. The leaden feeling was getting worse, and he knew that if she became aggressive again he couldn't cope. He got up and wound his scarf round his neck.

'I'm afraid I'll have to go. It's starting to snow, and I've some way to drive. Anyway, good luck whatever you decide. You'll need it, I think, if you do decide to keep the house.'

He cut short Saskia's attempt at thanks. She watched him walk briskly towards the door. He had a sturdy, self-contained look which seemed to warn people to keep away. But in spite of it he looked exhausted, his face harsh in the outside light as he opened the door. Now she felt better she wished she hadn't been so brusque.

She rescued the car from its parking place on Clifton Hill and chugged back to Queen Square, thankful that there was no immediate need to come to any decision about Gilead. Her anxiety about the cost of keeping it had been growing steadily, anxiety which would be bound to increase the longer she was unable to find work. She turned the problem over in her mind as she wove through the traffic, and hadn't got faintly near a solution by the time she entered Mr Elder's room once more.

He was drinking tea and eating a piece of Dundee

cake. He looked excited and conspiratorial as he took back the keys.

'There's been a highly interesting development in the matter of your great-aunt's bequest,' he said. 'I've just been asked to pass on an offer for Gilead to you. It's a most handsome one, and I really do urge you to consider it seriously. Let me pour you a cup of tea, and then we can discuss it at leisure.'

She sat down. Flakes of snow drifted noiselessly against the double-glazed window panes. He went over to a tray of tea next to the coffee machine.

'But how could anyone except you and I know that I've inherited Gilead?' she asked suspiciously.

'These things get around, I'm afraid,' he said. 'Letters have to be sent, and leaks do occur, though I can assure you that they would never originate from this office.'

He placed a cup of tea and a piece of cake in front of her.

'Now I do want you to concentrate, Miss Tyrrell,' he said. 'It's the most astounding offer. Three-quarters of a million pounds for the house and grounds.'

Saskia's head reeled at his words.

'Yes, I thought you'd be surprised,' said Mr Elder happily. 'It's particularly impressive in view of the current recession.'

Saskia thought dazedly that with money like that she'd never have to work for any film company again. She could even set up her own production house, and make exactly the sort of films she wanted. She'd have complete freedom. Anything was possible.

'It's a particularly opportune offer when one takes into consideration the need for total refurbishment, and the added improbability of getting planning permission for redevelopment. The house is really a white elephant as

it stands. But luckily Mr LeValet wants to use it as the flagship office for his group.'

'LeValet!' said Saskia. 'You mean Gerald LeValet has made this offer?'

'Of course. I wonder if you realise just how lucky you are? Not many young women of your age have access to three-quarters of a million pounds. And as I said before, you can rely on our firm for investment advice.'

He beamed at her like a clown, almost bouncing in his chair in his effort to persuade her.

Saskia was beginning to feel as if she were on some kind of ruthless emotional see-saw. Her original surge of excitement was already receding rapidly. She remembered again the skeleton of the once lovely Georgian house she'd seen just a few days earlier, and how much Artemis had loved Gilead. LeValet represented everything her great-aunt had loathed.

Her own life was in disarray because she'd already sold out once before. To put it right by betraying Artemis and selling out again to such a man was unthinkable. This was one decision she could make immediately.

'I won't make a deal with LeValet, now or ever,' she said. 'You can tell him the answer's no.'

Chapter 5

Mr Elder was like a wasp buzzing round a dish of jam. He kept phoning Saskia over the next few weeks to remind her that Gerald LeValet's offer was still open. She resolutely went on turning it down, but it became increasingly hard to stick to her decision when unemployment began to bite. She'd only been able to find brief spells of work on low-budget documentaries made by minor London production houses, and even then her fares absorbed most of her salary.

Morwenna was adamant that Saskia should look on the Bristol flat as her home until she found a permanent job or moved to Gilead. But Morwenna had gone away almost immediately to the States, and Ben was away too, staying in a farmer's barn on the Wiltshire Downs, where he was busy picketing a new motorway being driven through a nature reserve.

Neither had yet had the time to come and look at Gilead. Saskia missed them, and found she had too much time to worry about what to do with the house.

At the end of February Artemis's memorial service was held in Bristol Cathedral. At least it was a diversion, though Saskia could imagine her laughing ironically at the prospect of so many worthies coming to do her honour, when she'd spent most of her life battling with the establishment.

Saskia could have done with some support, for Mr Elder, who was organising the ceremony, had told her

that her mother was flying from South America for the occasion. But Ben and Morwenna were still away. The motorway development had reached a critical stage, and when filming finished Morwenna had flown on to New York to sort out her contract for the war documentary.

Saskia was late for the service. The Beetle wouldn't start at first, and when she finally arrived she spent ten minutes trying to find a parking place. After a mild spell at the beginning of the month the weather was raw again, with a hazy sun disappearing behind racing grey clouds.

As she walked across College Green towards the cathedral she saw the mayor's car drawn up at the north door in front of an impressive retinue of limousines. The great and the good were out in force.

A gaggle of photographers milled about outside, accompanied by a small news team from Avon Television. She recognised the interviewer, Mike Ogden, a fellow graduate from film school. She waved at him and dashed through the heavy oak door before he could collar her.

At least it was warm inside. The heat brought out a distinctive ecclesiastical smell of damp stone, ancient wood and polished leather. Music from the organ, playing softly while the congregation waited for the service to begin, flooded among pillars and arches in a rising tide. The cathedral was already half full, but Saskia didn't have time to look around. Mr Elder, clad in a funereal suit, darted at her and ushered her fussily down the aisle and into a front pew.

A waft of Mitsouko and a soft, husky voice greeted her.

'You really are naughty to be so late, Saskia darling. We've all been waiting for you.'

Her mother was wearing a black cloche hat with a diamanté bow pinned on one side. It framed a wistful, appealing face which still retained some of the wide-eyed charm of a small girl, though she was nearing fifty.

Saskia had seen very little of Laura since leaving school. Her infrequent letters were full of social chit-chat and not much else. Saskia liked her less and less when they did meet, yet felt guilty because of it. She envied her friends who seemed able to criticise their mothers and love them at the same time. Even Morwenna, who frequently called her mother the last of the female chauvinists, had been known to go back to the parental semi in Billericay in times of crisis.

Laura kissed the air on either side of Saskia's face. She hadn't given her a real hug in years. These days she was like a cat who hated to have ruffled fur. She waved an immaculate glove at Mr Elder to indicate that the ceremony could begin.

'What on earth have you been up to?' she demanded under cover of the music, which was swelling into a voluntary. 'As soon as I flew in I phoned you at Adrian's flat. He said you'd left Metropolis and moved away. He didn't know where you were. The poor boy was so anxious to find you. I only discovered from Mr Elder this morning that you'd moved to Bristol.'

Saskia had been living with Adrian for just a few weeks when her mother made a rare visit to London to attend a friend's wedding. Laura was old fashioned about some things, and Saskia thought she'd disapprove, even though most of her friends were on their second or third marriage. But Adrian had oozed charm, taken Laura on to the set of Metropolis's glossiest soap opera, and bought them lunch at Langan's.

'I must say I wasn't at all keen on the arrangement when you first told me about it,' Laura had said afterwards. 'But he's such a delightful person, and of course all you young things live together before marrying these days.'

The voluntary swelled. The bishop and his entourage

began to process towards the altar in a kaleidoscope of colour.

'I came down here because of Gilead,' said Saskia. 'You must know by now that Artemis left it to me.'

It was the easiest explanation, but one Laura didn't believe.

'Of course I know. Mr Elder told me. What I don't understand is how you could give up such a marvellous job. And I wonder if you realise just how much you've hurt Adrian's feelings. As for Artemis, she must have been going slightly dotty to leave you Gilead.'

To Saskia's relief the bishop had reached the altar and was exhorting the congregation to prayer. She sank to her knees, and gazed determinedly away from her mother. Her seat was almost beneath the lectern. The huge brass eagle supporting the Bible on its wings seemed to give her a disapproving stare.

'I'll speak to you afterwards,' hissed her mother, casting her eyes up to heaven with an expression worthy of Saint Bernadette.

Saskia tried to say some sort of prayer for Artemis, but she was struggling with the usual thoughts that accompanied any meeting with her mother. Laura flitted in and out of her life like some beautiful careless butterfly, commanding attention but never giving any affection in return. If there was a God, which Saskia often doubted, He was probably thinking up some dire punishment for her now because she couldn't help wishing that her mother had died and not Artemis.

Someone had arranged a huge stand of flowers at the foot of the chancel steps, white camellias and starry hothouse jasmine in a ruff of ferns. The hymn, 'Guide Me O Thou Great Jehovah', was announced. Whoever had chosen it had known Artemis well. She'd always said it reminded her of the deserts of north Africa.

The congregation added a ragged but enthusiastic accompaniment to the disciplined brilliance of the choir. A few rows behind Saskia on the other side of the aisle a male voice was bellowing lustily and out of tune.

She turned and saw Munro Hawkshaw, still in his leather jacket, hands clasped behind him, singing unselfconsciously. She was startled as much by his presence there as by the fact that he appeared to know the hymn by heart.

The organ thundered out a mighty amen. A visiting Kenyan academic read in Swahili and English the passage from the Bible beginning, 'Remember the Lord in the days of thy youth.' The bishop gave thanks for the life and work of Artemis Venner, and preached an eloquent sermon on the brotherhood of man.

There was another hymn, followed by a young black actress from the Theatre Royal reading the opening paragraph from *Out of Africa*. After more prayers the final anthem, the glorious uninhibited surge of the *African Sanctus*, filled the cathedral.

All through the service Laura behaved as though she was at a first night, turning to smile and wave at long-lost acquaintances in the congregation. The moment the ceremony finished she tripped down the aisle behind the bishop and his departing entourage, smiling at everyone like a bride.

'How lovely that so many people remember me,' she said happily to Saskia. 'I must thank them all for coming.'

She proceeded to forget her daughter at once, diving among the departing service goers at the doorway with chirrups of pleasure. Saskia could see no one there she knew except Mr Elder. To her relief Munro Hawkshaw had disappeared. She waited resignedly for her mother, withdrawing to a comparatively quiet position by the tomb of a florid Tudor squire and his offspring.

'Good morning, Saskia,' said a ringing elderly voice.

It was Miss Moxon, in a frayed purple headscarf and her army coat.

'I wonder what dear Artemis would have made of that,' she said. 'At least they took my advice on the composition of the service. And I insisted on doing the flowers. I brought them from Gilead. When are you moving in, my dear?'

'I haven't decided to live there yet,' said Saskia.

Miss' Moxon ignored her. 'It'll be splendid to have Gilead occupied once more. Now do tell me, is that your mother Laura over there, in the hat like a bathing cap? I haven't seen her for years.'

'Yes, that's Laura. Come and meet her again.'

'I think not,' said Miss Moxon. 'With all due respect, we never really had much in common. And I must be off in a moment. I've promised to go to a bread and water lunch organised by the Quakers in aid of those poor souls in Somalia. Perhaps you'd like to join me?'

'I'm afraid I'm having lunch with my mother,' said Saskia regretfully. Bread and water with Miss Moxon would have been infinitely preferable, but Laura had already told her that she'd booked a table at a Clifton restaurant.

After a short reinforcing lecture on the necessity of restoring Gilead's gardens to their former splendour, Miss Moxon said goodbye and disappeared through the main entrance. The congregation was beginning to drift away. Laura was talking animatedly to a man who had his back to Saskia. She beckoned and reluctantly Saskia went to her side.

'I want you meet a very old friend,' said Laura. 'I knew him when your father was alive. His name's Gerald LeValet. Gerald, this is my daughter Saskia.'

He turned towards her. He was taller than Saskia had

imagined, in his early-fifties, solidly built with a heavy fleshy face. His hair sprang back in crisp waves from his forehead, dark and perfectly barbered, but somehow too dark for his colourless skin. He smiled, revealing even teeth almost undetectably capped. Saskia would have known him again as the man in the limousine by his eyes, an unfathomable opaque brown, like muddied water.

'I'm delighted to meet you at last,' he said, and held out his hand. Reluctantly she took it. The skin was warm and moist. He smiled at her again with his too-white teeth.

'Gerald's been telling me about the very generous offer he's made you for Gilead,' said Laura. 'What a lucky girl you are. It quite puts my little legacy in the shade, and it'll solve all the problems about what to do with the place. I hope you won't keep him waiting too long.'

Saskia was furious that her mother had been discussing her private affairs.

'I haven't kept Mr LeValet waiting. He's already been told several times that I don't want to sell to him. And yours isn't a little bequest. Artemis was more than generous to us both.'

'You haven't got some romantic notion about living there, have you?' said Laura. She smiled at LeValet. 'Saskia always was such a dreamer, you know.'

'I've been abroad looking after my overseas interests, or I'd have been in touch with you before,' said LeValet smoothly to Saskia. His voice was deep and caressing.

'There's nothing to get in touch about. The matter's already settled,' she answered.

'I quite understand that while you're still grieving for your aunt you're not able to make any final decision,' said LeValet. 'But time is a great healer, and we all have to let go of the dead ultimately. I think that when you realise how much Gilead in my hands will benefit the underprivileged, you'll change your mind.'

'And what exactly would you do with it?' Saskia asked. She was taut with anger, but curious to find out the full extent of his plans.

'You need have no worries. It'll be most tastefully adapted to modern requirements as my new headquarters, the flagship of LeValet Enterprises. I'd like to use the gardens to enlarge my site next door, where I'm going to build my largest residential home yet, with accommodation for at least two hundred senior citizens. I feel very strongly that those as privileged as myself have a responsibility to use their wealth for the good of the community.'

'It sounds wonderful, Gerald,' said Laura, smiling brilliantly at him.

His picture of the alterations to Gilead made Saskia feel sick. His voice was like warm oil, covering his words with a false sheen. She was now desperate to get away from him, and was intensely relieved when Mike Ogden put his head round the main door, and gestured vigorously at her to come outside.

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'but I really must go. A friend wants to speak to me. Goodbye, Mr LeValet. I can only say again that I'm not going to sell. I'll see you later, Laura.'

Her mother's protesting voice pursued her as she threaded her way through the remaining congregation, and emerged into the chilly air of the porch. As she stepped on to the pavement she was greeted by a battery of flashlights. Mike grabbed her arm and whisked her away round the side of the cathedral to the grass in front of the west door. He was wearing a green Barbour jacket, and looked cold and slightly hung over.

'Amazing news that you've inherited Artemis Venner's house, Saskia. I'd no idea she was your great-aunt.'

'How do you know that?' demanded Saskia.

'LeValet's PR man told all of us. And I gather you're going to sell to Happy Valley Homes? How about giving

us an interview? After all, you owe me, Saskia. Remember I dropped you that hint about the job at Metropolis?'

Reluctantly she let him position her against a backdrop of the bishop's palace.

'I'll do the interview, Mike, but I'm not selling Gilead. That man's lethal. I wonder who else he's told.'

'Just about everyone,' said Mike cheerfully. 'Apparently it's on the front page of today's *Sentinel*, LeValet's local paper, all about the fantastic offer he's made for the house, and how he's going to benefit the whole community. It's his usual schmaltz. He manages to come over as a cross between Mother Teresa and Sir Christopher Wren. We're going to talk to him as well. He loves interviews. We could do one with you together, if you'd prefer it.'

'No thanks,' said Saskia. 'And he knows very well I'm not selling. He's no right to behave as though it's almost his.'

He clipped a microphone to her wrap.

'OK, OK, but don't get mad with me. It's not my fault. At least this interview will give you a chance to make your position clear. It's bloody cold out here, so shall we get on with it? Unless you'd rather have a quick drink before we start?'

He looked at her hopefully. Saskia shook her head. That way she'd have to disclose even more information. At least if she did the interview now it'd only be brief.

She took a deep breath and turned to face the camera. A small cluster of onlookers had gathered. She could hear them arguing about her identity. To her annoyance Munro Hawkshaw was standing at the back, watching gravely, the collar of his jacket turned up and his shoulders hunched stubbornly against the wind.

'All right, turn over,' Mike said to the cameraman. Exposed to the blank, impartial eye of the lens, Saskia

felt like a snail without a shell. It was odd and unsettling to be on the other side of the camera.

Mike launched into his introduction, opening with an ingenuous smile designed to put her off her guard.

'It was revealed today that local tycoon Gerald LeValet has made a bid for Gilead, the Lutyens house in Clifton which was owned by Artemis Venner, the renowned anthropologist. The news was released just before Miss Venner's memorial service, which took place this morning here in the cathedral. She was equally well known for her notorious love affair with Carl Sandstrom, the Hollywood film star. She left Gilead to her great-niece, Saskia Tyrrell, whom I have with me now. Tell me, Saskia, have you discovered any more information among your great-aunt's papers about her fascinating love affair?'

'I haven't had an opportunity to look at them yet,' said Saskia, furious with him for already slanting the interview this way, 'and when I do, I intend to keep them private.'

'But so many people are interested in the details of that affair. Surely any new information about her belongs to the world?'

'My great-aunt hated publicity, particularly after the way the press hounded her over Carl Sandstrom. I've no wish to discuss her private life.'

Mike flapped his hands at the cameraman to stop.

'Saskia, darling,' he said in exasperation, 'it's me you're talking to, Mike, your old college mate, remember? Give a little, please. You'll kill the interview completely dead with answers like that. Let's try a different angle.'

Mike produced another of his smiles, and the camera moved closer in.

'Gerald LeValet says in today's *Sentinel* that he's offered you three-quarters of a million pounds for Gilead. Can you confirm that?'

Saskia glared at the camera.

'He made an offer, yes.'

'Naturally you'll sell,' said Mike in a cajoling voice.

'I'll never sell to him, and Mr LeValet has no reason to suppose otherwise.'

'He says he wants to use it as his administration headquarters for housing for the elderly and homeless. Surely your aunt would have approved?'

Saskia wondered whose side he was on.

'Gilead is priceless,' she said, 'and my great-aunt would never have approved of its being altered in any way.'

Mike Ogden sighed. It was getting darker, and a sudden gust of hail swept across the green, rattling like shot against the glass of the west doors.

'Hell, we'll get nowhere now. We'd better wrap, and try to set up some lighting in the porch for the interview with LeValet.'

Still, he thought, at least they'd got something controversial on film, and at least Saskia looked good, hair blowing in the wind, face vivid above her black fringed wrap. Her legs were sensational in that short skirt. If his director hadn't made it clear that the interview with LeValet was vital, he'd have ditched it and taken her out to lunch.

She wasn't normally as prickly as today, but rumours had reached even Bristol of her final showdown with Adrian Greer, and presumably like at least half the television world at the moment she was frantically looking for a new job. He'd have liked to find out about that, too.

'Right, thanks a lot, darling, and look me up any time. Let's get together very soon. I must run now and set things up for LeValet.'

Munro had disappeared again, permanently Saskia hoped, and she slipped back thankfully into the cathedral. LeValet, flanked by his PR man and a heavyweight in a biker jacket who looked suspiciously like a minder, was

conducting a conversation on a cell-phone. Her mother was busy chatting to a church dignitary.

'It was an absolutely delightful service. Artemis would have been so honoured. I can't thank you enough.'

Everything seemed to be conspiring to make Artemis something she wasn't. Saskia moved away from Laura's relentless voice and LeValet's intrusive presence, walking restlessly down a side aisle below the north windows. The organist was practising softly for evensong. The opening notes of a Bach partita dropped into the air.

She found herself going up the steps to the thirteenth-century Lady Chapel. The windows were framed in wintery grey tracery, but behind the altar a yellow wall hanging shone like a patch of sunlight.

She sat down in a stone niche and looked across to a medieval carving of an orchestra of animals on the opposite wall. A monkey was playing the bagpipes next to a sheep who sawed away at a viol. She remembered her father showing it to her when she was small, and telling her about the masons who'd built the cathedral. That was when she'd first become interested in history.

It reminded her of him too much, and she made herself look away. Her eye wandered to a high stone dais next to the altar where a medieval knight lay in dignified sleep. His wife was next to him, wearing a complicated wimple and an expression of immense superiority. They both looked encouragingly peaceful. Saskia wondered if death really was the end. It was hard to believe that the spirit of someone like Artemis could be extinguished forever as casually as a candle flame.

She was aroused by a sudden movement behind the high tomb. In the dim light it seemed for one startling moment as if one of the effigies had come to life. A flash bulb blinded her momentarily. When her eyes had adjusted once more, Munro Hawkshaw was emerging into the

chancel, brushing dust off his jacket. He looked equally startled.

'Sorry,' he said. 'I didn't realise you were there. I was indulging in a little art photography. The woman on the tomb looks uncannily like some high Tory baroness, don't you think?'

'I saw you outside,' she said accusingly, still shaken by the incident. She felt as if he'd been eavesdropping on her thoughts. 'Why were you watching me?'

'I was waiting to speak to you. I tried to catch you earlier, but someone from Reuters waylaid me. Then I got tired of hanging about in the cold, and decided to photograph a few things in here. I thought you'd come back. I wanted you to have these.'

He handed her a manilla envelope. She hesitated for an instant, and then opened it, glancing up at him suspiciously. The contents slid into her hand. It was a series of photos of Artemis in her African village, talking to the elders, playing with the children, helping the women pound their grain. They were powerful, sensitive images which told Saskia at once that Artemis's last years had been good ones.

'Thank you,' she said gruffly.

She pushed them back into the envelope, trying to control her expression. He sat down and leaned back against the stone wall, watching her closely.

'Have I done something wrong again?' he asked.

'No, of course not.' It was hard to keep her voice steady. 'Thank you again. I mean it, really.'

She wished he'd go. She didn't want to deal with any more difficult people, today of all days, and she still had to face lunch with Laura.

'When I stayed with Artemis we discussed her photography quite a bit,' he said. 'She told me she had a large collection of stills she'd never sorted out. She said she

wanted to use them in a book some day. If ever you'd like any advice on putting one together, I'd be glad to help.'

Angrily she wondered why everyone insisted on pursuing her in this way, all trying to cash in on Artemis's death. No doubt he had his eye on shared royalties. He couldn't even wait until later to broach the subject, he was so keen to get his hands on Artemis's unpublished photos.

She got up abruptly and began to walk away from the Lady Chapel and down the aisle towards the door. He caught her up, a look of amusement on his face.

'Do you always rush off so suddenly? It's like talking to a dodgem car.'

She turned and faced him.

'Can't you understand?' she said wearily. 'I've been dealing all morning with people who want to exploit Artemis's death. I've had enough. I'm very grateful for the photos, and I've said so, but I don't want to make a fast buck out of Artemis, and I'm not interested in spin-offs of any sort. So thank you, and goodbye.'

She thrust the envelope of photos back at him, though she longed to keep them. He took them. His face became stony. He hunched his shoulders in a way which was becoming familiar to her.

'I'm sorry if you look on it like that. You've misunderstood me. But it doesn't matter.'

He pushed the photos roughly back into his pocket. His northern accent intensified.

'I never wanted anything in return. And it beats me what Artemis saw in you. I'm not wasting any more time trying to find out.'

He strode rapidly away from her, feet ringing on the flagstones. Saskia followed him more slowly, and saw him disappear through the main door. She felt a rush of relief, and then almost at once an ashamed feeling that perhaps she'd been too high-handed again.

She continued slowly towards her mother, trying to subdue her conscience. Laura was now on her own, carefully repainting her lips in a small gold-framed mirror under the disapproving gaze of a grey-cardiganed volunteer manning the giftshop.

'I need an enormous drink,' she said to Saskia. 'Gerald very sweetly called me a taxi on his cell-phone. I really couldn't face that car of yours. Such a pity he couldn't join us, but he had a meeting in London this afternoon. Really, Saskia, you needn't have been quite so off-hand with him.'

The restaurant was luxurious, and liberally staffed with personable young male waiters. Laura sat down and surveyed the table, which was decorated with pale green napery and a vase of scentless white roses.

She shrugged off her coat on to the back of her chair. Underneath she was wearing a deep violet wool dress, and a collar of pearls. She was still slender, small and fragile-boned, with a perfect oval face which would not droop in old age but simply become mask-like.

'This is nice,' she said. 'I read about it in *Harper's* coming down in the train. Oh, the bliss of being able to travel first class again. Ralphie was always so unsympathetic about such things. Luckily that sweet Mr Elder sent me an advance on my legacy.'

Saskia wondered why her mother was talking about Ralph as though he was dead.

'I was amazed that Artemis left me anything,' her mother continued. 'Perhaps she felt guilty. I always thought she was jealous because I'd taken your father from her, but he was only her nephew after all. Poor Artemis. She was frustrated, I suppose, especially after the end of the Carl Sandstrom affair. Now that really was an odd business. He's still alive, you know, living on some

ranch in Arizona. I half expected him to turn up at the service.'

'No one could have been less frustrated than Artemis,' said Saskia indignantly. 'You know that very well.'

'You were so fond of her, too. That always hurt.' Laura put on a long-suffering expression.

'It's a good thing someone was fond of me,' said Saskia grimly.

Laura blushed faintly and picked up the menu.

'You were too young to understand what I was going through. I was devastated by your father's death. It took me years to get over it. And you became so uncommunicative when he died.'

She ran a long varnished finger nail down the list of dishes.

'Now what shall we have? How about seafood mousse with an avocado coulis? That sounds delicious. We'll have some Chablis to go with it.'

'Whatever you like,' said Saskia listlessly.

Her mother switched from one subject to another like a clockwork train. Saskia wondered if she had even bothered to read the wording of Artemis's bequest: 'Two hundred thousand pounds, free from inheritance tax, to my nephew's wife, Laura Tyrrell, now Laura Smythe, in the hope that she'll use it to discover what she wants to do with her life.'

Laura ordered, flirting with the waiter as she did so, automatically deflecting his attention from Saskia to herself. Wavering between amusement and annoyance, Saskia watched her, wishing she could at least just accept her mother as she was, and that she didn't always arouse in her this awful maelstrom of resentment.

'Please don't sulk today of all days, darling,' said Laura. 'I've something very special to tell you.'

The waiter brought the Chablis. It flowed, straw pale, into the glasses. Laura raised hers to Saskia.

'Well, I've done it at last,' she said, 'I've left Ralph. I'm not going back to South America.' She gave a brittle laugh. 'Presumably Artemis would have approved of that, at least. She never wanted me to marry him. I thought she was jealous at the time, but for once she was right.'

Saskia took a large gulp of wine to cover her surprise and dismay. Her mother on the loose, bored, with plenty of money and plenty of leisure to interfere in Saskia's life, was a terrifying prospect.

She waited while another waiter placed the food on the table, two very small, very pink mousses reposing in puddles of green on white plates. He mixed the salad with a flourish, and left them.

Laura looked at Saskia hopefully.

'Well, say something, do. I thought you'd be pleased. You've always made it very clear that you didn't like him.'

She began to dig daintily into the mousse with her fork.

'Only because he never wanted me from the start,' said Saskia. 'But I think he really loves you in his own peculiar way. Are you absolutely sure you're doing the right thing?'

'Of course it's the right thing. He'd become such a bore lately, always nagging me to take on voluntary work, but I'd quite enough on my hands with all the entertaining out there.'

'So what are you going to do now?' Saskia asked in a careful voice.

'Why, open a boutique, of course, here in Clifton. If there's one thing I do know it's clothes. And I'm good at selling. My stall at the embassy fêtes always did better than all the others.'

'A boutique is a bit different from a stall at a fête.'

'I'll make it work,' said Laura, sparkling at her like a child contemplating a doll's tea party. 'I've got some wonderful ideas already.'

'And what did Ralph say to all this? He can't have been too pleased.'

She thought of cold, correct Ralph, intensely possessive of her mother, intensely ambitious, always doing the right thing, and making it very clear that he didn't want a step-daughter under his feet.

Laura gave a little shiver, like a cat shaking off raindrops.

'Angry of course, then pompous, then angry again when he found I wouldn't change my mind. He wants me back, but that's because he's in the running for an ambassador's post.'

'I know I was very young at the time, but I never could understand why you married him. You knew he didn't want me around.'

Her mother looked wary.

'It wasn't easy for me. You were so young, and your father had always looked after both of us. I'd only done a little secretarial work before we married. I wanted us to have a nice home, security, a good school for you. Being married to your father was wonderful, I don't deny it, but we never had much money. What painter's family does? Being poor is no fun for a widow. I was advised to marry again.'

'Advised!' said Saskia incredulously. 'How could you make the decision so cold-bloodedly? Who advised you? I'm sure it wasn't Artemis.'

'You always see life in such black and white terms, darling. Sometimes it isn't like that, it's just grey, and you're not sure what's right and wrong. It isn't easy being a single parent.'

'Father left you the house. You could have got a job and trained to do something interesting. Artemis would have helped you. We could have stayed together then. I wonder if you ever knew how much I hated boarding school?'

Her mother looked deeply hurt. She put down her fork and made a tremulous gesture at the waiter. He was at her side instantly.

'Is there something wrong, Madam?'

'It was delicious, but I can't eat any more. I've had a rather difficult morning. I've no appetite at the moment.'

There were sympathetic enquiries, and the head waiter appeared, suggesting brandy.

'No, no, not just yet,' said Laura. 'I mustn't be silly. After all this is a happy occasion as well. I think I might manage a little dessert after all, and then some black coffee, very strong.'

The waiter was dispatched for the dessert trolley. Laura seemed restored by the attention. She smiled at Saskia.

'Let's talk about you. We must discuss Gilead. You can't really mean to keep it on. It's far too big for you to live in alone. I certainly wouldn't stay there. It's such a barn of a place, and furnished so bizarrely too. That sinister statue in the hall always seemed to be staring at me.'

'I love Gilead. I always have, and I'm not giving it up if I can help it.'

'I can't let you have anything towards its upkeep if that's what you're expecting.'

'Have I ever asked you for money? You haven't had to fund me since my father died. Artemis paid for all my education.'

'But, darling, do you really understand what an outstanding offer Gerald's made you? You need never work again.'

'I wish you'd realise that I love my work. I couldn't give it up. I just want LeValet to mind his own business

and stop pestering me. Anyway, I never knew you were friendly with him. When did you meet?'

'I don't know him all that well,' said Laura vaguely, her eyes on the dessert trolley which was now trundling towards them. 'Now shall I have profiteroles or tiramisu? What would you like?'

'Nothing for me, just coffee,' said Saskia. She'd pushed aside her plate as well. The mousse had been heavy with cream, and that combined with the tense atmosphere was making her feel queasy. 'It looked to me as if you knew him quite well.'

'If you'd been a diplomat's wife as long as I have, you'd know that it's vital to maintain good relations with everyone. You never know when people may be useful. Your father and I used to meet him occasionally at parties, but he was already out of our league.'

She paused while a helping of tiramisu was placed before her, and the waiter sprinkled it with grated chocolate.

'They were rich people's parties,' she went on, when he'd gone to fetch the coffee, 'and we were invited because your father's work was just starting to become known. Matthew never wanted to go, but I made him because he sometimes got a commission that way. We needed the money. Things were difficult then.'

Saskia didn't remember life being difficult. They'd lived in a small dilapidated mews house in Clifton. There was a long room under the roof which her father used as a studio. Her mother was quite different in those days. She had long hair, blonde and silky, and wore flowing rainbow-coloured Indian dresses which smelt of incense. She was always laughing. Friends came in and out all the time, there were huge impromptu meals, and no one treated Saskia as if she didn't exist. That Laura seemed like another person now.

Her mother had sold out too, Saskia thought bitterly,

just as she had done to Adrian. Perhaps it ran in the family. Perhaps she didn't really have any right to make judgements after all.

'I'm going to rent a flat in Leigh Woods for the time being,' said Laura brightly. 'I've always liked it there, just over the suspension bridge, and it's only five minutes from Clifton.'

She leaned forward and laid her hand on Saskia's.

'Please believe me, darling, I really am going to try again. That's what I've been wanting to tell you. And I want us to start again too. I feel we've become strangers. Can't we try? Why don't you come and live with me for a while, until Gilead's sold, and help me set up the boutique? I'll need some advice. I know it won't be for long, of course, because I feel sure you'll go back to Metropolis in the end. Adrian told me he was keeping your job open for you. What a dear he is.'

Saskia couldn't bear the pleading expression in her mother's eyes. She pulled her hand away from Laura's.

'Surely you don't need me to help you? You're not even fifty, after all, and if you can't work out things on your own, you might as well go back to Ralph. Of course we can be friends, but not the sort of friends you mean.'

She knew she sounded arrogant and unsympathetic, but she felt nothing but panic at the prospect of being saddled with an unwanted middle-aged child whom she didn't even like very much.

'How can you speak like that to me?' said Laura. 'You've always tried to shut me out, ever since Matthew died. It was partly Artemis's fault: she deliberately tried to alienate you from me.'

'Artemis hardly knew me when Father died. She'd been abroad too long,' blazed Saskia. 'You and I were alienated already by then, by your coldness. You were the one who did the shutting out. She saved me.'

Laura's bottom lip was quivering. She was about to cry, her last and most effective weapon. She'd never pursue an argument to its logical end.

As she was reaching for her handbag to search for a tissue, the door to the restaurant opened to admit a customer in search of a late lunch. A gust of cold wind blew towards them. Laura looked up, and her face changed instantly.

'Oh, good, what a relief,' she said happily. 'It's Adrian at last.'

Saskia watched in stunned disbelief as Adrian was greeted by the head waiter, who gestured to their table. He looked towards them and raised his hand and smiled. Laura waved back at him. He began to take off his long navy cashmere overcoat.

'This is your doing, isn't it?' said Saskia, turning furiously on Laura. 'I can't think how else Adrian would know we were here. How could you do such a thing without asking me first?'

'Now don't be silly, darling. You'll thank me later. Adrian told me you'd had some falling-out, but he was sure you wanted to make up really. He said you were just too proud to take the first step. So I've taken it for you. It's lucky I was here. I rang him this morning just before the service, and he said he'd take the first train down.'

Adrian arrived at their table. He kissed Laura's hand extravagantly. Saskia kept her own hands firmly hidden, and gave him an icy nod.

He looked faintly abashed.

'Hallo, Saskia. How are you?' he said cautiously. 'I was so sorry to hear about your great-aunt. I'd no idea you were related to Artemis Venner.'

He sat down, loosened his pale grey double-breasted jacket, and ordered another bottle of Chablis and a plate of smoked trout. Saskia said nothing, staring determinedly

into a far corner of the room while he enquired after Laura's health and her journey. It was obvious from the conversation that Laura had already had a long confidential talk with him on the phone.

'I'm looking for a flat in Bristol now,' she said brightly, 'but I'm more concerned about you two young things.' She threw a sideways glance at Saskia's angry face. 'Saskia, Adrian's come down here especially with some very exciting news for you.'

'He's got nothing to say that I'd want to hear,' said Saskia, beginning to pull her wrap round her from the back of the chair. 'I'll let you two talk in peace. I'm going.'

'Don't go, please, Saskia,' said Adrian, putting his hand on her arm. To her astonishment his expression was genuinely concerned. 'At least give me a hearing.'

Deeply distrustful, she put her wrap round her shoulders, and waited.

'Well?' she said. 'What do you want now? Me to finish the script for you, so that you can make the film and pass it off entirely as your own? Save your breath. There's nothing doing.'

'Saskia, please,' said Laura. 'Adrian's come all this way especially to see you. There's no need to be so unpleasant to him.'

'He's been more than unpleasant to me,' said Saskia, looking at him meaningfully. 'I haven't heard any apologies yet.'

Adrian looked slightly green, and tugged at his tie.

'All right, Saskia, I'm sorry, really sorry. I shouldn't have behaved as I did. For God's sake, don't make this any harder. I want you back.'

'There, isn't that sweet of him?' purred Laura.

'Even if I wanted to come back, and I don't, it could never be on the original terms. I'd rather be unemployed.'

Adrian took a large gulp of wine.

'The terms will be different, very different, I promise.'

'What exactly?' demanded Saskia.

She knew now that she'd given him an opening, but she was curious to know exactly how highly he rated her.

Adrian took a deep breath.

'A permanent appointment. Another three K on your salary. And a company car. I hope you'd consider coming back to live with me, but if not Metropolis can get you a preferential mortgage on a place of your own.'

Saskia stared at him. She could hardly believe what she was hearing.

'And what about billing?' she demanded. 'You haven't mentioned that.'

'Your name alone at the top of the credits,' he said. He was beaming. 'Come on, Saskia darling, say yes. It's been bloody awful without you.'

She looked at him suspiciously. It all was beginning to seem far too generous for Adrian. There must be a sting in the tail.

'And could I go on making my sort of programmes?'

'Of course, with just one proviso. I want you to drop the Hannah More idea for the moment, and start work right away on something new that's just up your street. I know you'll think it's a fabulous idea.'

'And what's that?' said Saskia.

'Something that'll be absolutely perfect for you. A drama documentary of the life of Artemis Venner! Laura tells me you've got access to all her film and private papers. And she says there's even some amazing house you can use as a background. We can do a complete dramatised reconstruction of the love affair. It'll be red-hot. We'll syndicate it world-wide.'

Saskia pushed back her chair, turning it over, and banged the table furiously. The vase of roses overturned,

and water began to seep into the tablecloth in a large sodden patch.

'No, definitely no! You can take your offer back to London. Go and make the sort of films about anyone but Artemis, but don't dare to touch her!'

'Calm down, for Christ's sake,' said Adrian, brushing water off his jacket. 'It wouldn't be my sort of film, it'd be yours of course. I'd only retain a modicum of creative control, just enough to ensure good ratings.'

'You lying hypocrite! I know exactly what that means,' said Saskia. She could hear her voice rising. The waiters were looking at her open-mouthed.

'But you've all that wonderful material,' said Adrian, miraculously keeping his voice smooth. 'And your mother's told me how keen you are to keep on the house. I'd even fix royalties for you. Just think, there'd be no more worries financially. And even if you say no to me, the word's going to get out about this, you know. You'll be pestered by every major television company. You might as well make the film with someone you can trust.'

Suddenly a huge, crazy, infinitely enticing plan began to form in Saskia's mind, one which would effectively silence everyone and provide the perfect reason for living at Gilead. All she needed was the initial finance, and she'd get it somehow.

'I'll rough out an agreement tonight. You can vet it all yourself,' he said, stepping up the pressure.

'It sounds a wonderful offer to me,' said Laura. 'Come along, darling, don't make another mistake.'

'I'm not going to make a mistake,' said Saskia, trying to keep the excitement out of her voice. 'I won't sign any new agreement with Metropolis, and that's final.'

'I've told you already what that means,' said Adrian impatiently. 'The idea'll just be snapped up by someone

else, and then you won't have any control over how the film's made.'

'But I intend to have complete control,' said Saskia.

Adrian looked at her in disbelief.

'How? Be realistic. It's just not possible.'

'Everything's possible,' said Saskia triumphantly. 'I'm going to set up my own company and make the film myself.'

Chapter 6

A waiter rushed over and began to dab at the cloth. Adrian was silent, wondering how best to deal with this latest outburst of Saskia's. She really was impossible. He felt almost sorry for her thinking she could pull off such a grandiose scheme. He was saved from an immediate reply by Laura moving to the rescue.

'Saskia darling, sit down again, please. Don't leave just yet, when I haven't seen you for so long. And you must have a brandy with us, Adrian. Let's all talk this over sensibly.'

He took a quick look at Saskia. To his annoyance she subsided into her chair with a look of immense self-satisfaction. He thought furiously while Laura chattered away about nothing in particular. Coffee was served, and when the wine waiter brought them balloon glasses of Armagnac he began to feel slightly more cheerful.

'Aren't you having delusions of grandeur?' he enquired. 'You'd need at least a hundred K up front to make even a twenty-five-minute film, yet you can't afford a new car. And a film about Artemis Venner without footage shot in Africa would lose half its point. The location expenses would cost a bomb. You haven't the first idea how to raise capital, either.'

He picked up the spoon from the sugar bowl, and began to ram it into the crystals with short crunching stabs.

'I've a very good idea,' said Saskia. 'I've had ample time to study your methods.'

In spite of her words she was beginning to look less confident. It was probably dawning on her that she was the last person to deal with the cut and thrust of high finance.

'You'd be lucky to escape the bankruptcy court. Small film companies are going bust all the time,' he went on. 'And what reputable cameraman would risk his livelihood working for such a shaky set-up these days?'

Luckily he'd heard that her friend Morwenna Bly, who was a stroppy bitch but an excellent camerawoman, and who might have gone in with her, was in the States setting up a contract there.

'It's far too big a project for a young girl like you to take on alone,' said Laura.

'Do please leave this to me,' said Adrian, rounding on her irritably and forgetting to use his usual ingratiating tone. He wasn't surprised that Saskia got on so badly with her mother. She was an arch manipulator. He turned back to Saskia.

'It's time to take a reality check, darling. OK, you're a great producer, and you've loads of imagination and flair. You're not bad at handling crews, either. But a television documentary is primarily a business proposition. It has to make money for the networks you sell it to, but it has to attract money before you can even begin. What do you know about selling ideas to financial execs? Nothing. They'd eat you for breakfast.'

'Don't forget I've got an original setting and original sources to work from,' said Saskia.

He wondered why she wasn't capitulating faster, and experienced a first pang of doubt. He took a large gulp of Armagnac.

'But how soon could you get it off the ground on your own? It'd take you weeks to set up. It's a now story, especially in the States with the Sandstrom connection.

The networks there will want to grab it while Artemis Venner's death is still fresh in everyone's mind.'

'It won't take me long,' said Saskia defiantly.

The more Adrian opposed her the more determined she was to make the film. And hadn't Artemis herself said that crazy projects were the best? Besides, ideas were already crowding into her mind, like bubbles rising in champagne, and she hadn't even begun to look through Artemis's private papers and her film archives at Gilead.

She'd had a letter from Mr Elder that morning saying that the title deeds of Gilead had now been transferred to her name, and she could collect the keys as soon as she wished. She'd been intending to visit his office after the cathedral ceremony, and now she couldn't wait to get there. She decided to burn her boats completely.

'I'm going to move in to Gilead tomorrow,' she said. 'I want to start writing the script at once. You'd better make up your mind, Adrian, that it's been a wasted journey.'

Laura looked aghast.

'Move into that mausoleum on your own? What about security? You'll be the target of every thief in town. Really, Saskia, now you're being foolish. I won't allow it.'

'Mr Elder had a state of the art security system put in for the caretakers,' said Saskia. 'And I'll let the mews cottage to someone who'll keep an eye on the grounds.'

She said this with more confidence than she really felt. Adrian, ever alert, picked up the shade of diffidence in her voice.

'Laura's told me all about Gilead. With a huge house like that you'll never be able to concentrate all your energies on film-making,' he said.

He began to slice purposefully into a wedge of oozing Brie from the cheese board just placed before him.

'But have it your own way,' he went on. 'Why should

I worry if you bankrupt yourself? I'm going to make my film anyway. I'm bound to get it finished first, and after I've scooped the market no one will be interested in your version. It'll be quite refreshing to go ahead without having to worry about your academic sensibilities. So you know the score. It's no holds barred from now on.'

He flashed a complacent smile at her, slathered the cheese on to a Bath Oliver, and began to chew as he watched her reaction.

Saskia almost gave in. She'd never have dreamt that he'd go ahead without her help. She'd underestimated Adrian's capacity for vengeance, thinking feebly that he'd let her have a clear field for old time's sake. She now had the prospect of a ruthless fight on her hands, as well as a huge financial gamble.

'I think you're being very silly,' said Laura crossly to Saskia. 'I'm sure Adrian will make a wonderful film about Artemis, and it's no good expecting me to pick up the pieces if you get into financial difficulties.'

Saskia turned on her.

'I've no intention of asking you for money. But you were saying only half an hour ago that you want us to be friends, so why can't you at least give me a little moral support over this? I don't suppose you've the slightest idea of the way Adrian will represent Artemis, unless perhaps you're out for some kind of revenge on her. I'd hate to think that.'

'You know I'm not,' said Laura indignantly, her lower lip beginning to quiver. 'I just want what's best for you. But people do say Artemis led Carl Sandstrom on, you know.'

Laura's words finally made up Saskia's mind. She had to make the film now, whatever the cost. She owed it to Artemis to present her to the world as she remembered her, not as the conniving man-eater she'd end up as in Adrian's hands. And in doing so perhaps she'd be able

to restore her own self-esteem, and in an odd way repay Artemis for everything she'd given her.

She got to her feet again, in a leisurely manner this time, and furled her wrap around her. She gave them both a brilliant smile. Adrian's face, which from his own smile had still been expecting her surrender, fell.

'If you made even a slight attempt to be on my side for a change I might begin to believe you,' she said to Laura. 'And as for you, Adrian, someone will buy my film, because it'll be the truth, and because not everyone in television is like you.'

'But when shall I see you again?' Laura quavered. 'Don't forget I'm all on my own now. I thought you'd come and look at flats with me this afternoon.'

'I'm too busy. Ask Adrian to help you,' said Saskia, with a challenging look at him.

'Would you really, Adrian dear?' said Laura, brightening up. 'That'd be such a help.'

He gave a sickly smile.

'So sorry,' he said smoothly. 'I'd have loved to any other time, but I must rush back to London. Anthea's waiting to set up a planning session.'

'And you can't wait to set up the casting couch,' said Saskia.

She picked up her bag, and delivered a parting shot.

'See you at the BAFTA awards next year, then, Adrian.'

He flushed. It was a sensitive point that none of his documentaries had ever won the ultimate accolade.

'BAFTA award!' he said viciously. 'You'd be lucky to win a Brownie badge. I'll – I'll – give you the Porsche if you do.'

'I'll remember that next March,' she said.

When Saskia let herself into the courtyard at Gilead it was the first time she'd returned since her visit in January.

Superstitiously she'd avoided going there again until it was really hers. She was on her own again, for Ben had returned from his prolonged session of picketing only the evening before, and had left at dawn for Heathrow to meet Morwenna off a morning plane.

The early-spring sunshine was trapped and intensified by the high enclosing walls and the golden stone of the house. Snowdrops glimmered in pale clumps among the dead leaves, the fully open blossoms faintly striped with green. Witch hazel flowers clustered among reddish branches, wafting an intense perfume through the air. Tiny acid green leaves were already unfurling on the winter jasmine.

She'd brought her luggage with her, and heaved it from the car, which was parked outside, up the steps and into the hall. Svengali leaped out of his basket and went to sit on the bottom stair, casting baleful glances around him.

Saskia sat down on the Zanzibar chest. She could hear all the tiny whisperings and creakings of an old house, as if it were settling around her. She felt herself relax almost imperceptibly into its embrace.

She picked up Svengali, and walked through the hall into the drawing room. It was cold but sunny. Shafts of sunlight lay along the backs of the sofas, waking the colours in the kelim runners like a tray of jumbled stones in a jeweller's window. Svengali jumped from her arms and began to prowl round the room.

A pile of dusty logs lay in the wide fireplace, and impulsively she put her cigarette lighter to the yellow crumpled newspaper beneath the kindling. It caught at once, and sparks whirled up the chimney.

Saskia threw open a French window. More snowdrops were blooming on the terrace. She picked a handful, dew from the leaves coldly sprinkling the backs of her hands, and crammed them into a small glass vase she first filled

from the rainwater butt. When she went back into the room the logs were beginning to catch. She set the flowers on a coffee table. Already the room was coming to life.

Svengali jumped on to one of the sofas, kneading the cushions into a hollow, and lay down before the blaze. Saskia put the fireguard in place, and went up to the first floor. She walked slowly beneath the arched oak beams of the gallery, fascinated as always by Artemis's collection of African art. It contained so many wonderful and odd pieces, ranging from two stunning Benin bronze heads of a king and queen, to a toy lorry made of flattened food tins and wire given to Artemis by a child in Lagos. Saskia hesitated a moment before entering the main bedroom, thinking of all the mornings she'd gone in to greet her and hear her plans for the day.

There was a wide four-poster ebony bed from the East African coast. The posts and canopy were intricately carved and hung with airy muslin curtains. Artemis had always held court there before breakfast, sipping endless cups of tea, surrounded by the day's mail and pages from her latest manuscript, yet flatteringly ready to abandon them all and talk to Saskia.

Beside the bed was a tall, many-drawered chest, and on it another photo of Carl Sandstrom. Saskia picked it up and studied it. Before she first went to Gilead her mother had told her, tight-lipped, the barest outline of the affair. Though Saskia was intensely curious, she had never discussed it with Artemis, for she sensed that it would hurt her.

But when she was fifteen, at the beginning of a long summer holiday with Artemis, her own problems had at last pushed her into raising the subject. Her first mild love affair had gone inexplicably wrong, and ever since she'd got to Gilead she'd been wallowing in a bout of self-pity which, though tremendously comforting at first, left her

with a queasy feeling of self-dissatisfaction, like eating three pieces of chocolate cake at once. She longed for Artemis to know how she felt, but didn't know how to tell her.

Artemis certainly knew something was wrong, for she gave Saskia a distinctly quizzical glance over the top of her spectacles as she came into the bedroom for their ritual pre-breakfast talk on her first morning. She tossed the last of her letters on to the pile beside her.

'That's the mail for today, thank heaven,' she said. 'If only it didn't contain the usual trawl of sad, mad and bad, I might look forward to it. Requests from African refugees asking for money – it's very hard to resist something like that. A letter from a militant feminist telling me it's my duty to join her crusade to subjugate the male race.' She hesitated. 'And this,' she went on, picking up the letter on top of the heap, then dropping it with a gesture of contempt.

'Is that the bad one?' asked Saskia.

'Yes,' said Artemis. 'You've never come across the sort of mail produced by sick minds, I hope, but I think you're old enough to see it now, just for once.'

She handed Saskia the letter. Saskia turned it over curiously. Inside, on a piece of kitchen paper, sprawled printing in red biro, letters tumbling after each other in their venomous haste to wound.

'"Bitch," it said. "You ruined his life and his wife's. Someone like you ruined my life too. And one day someone like me will make you pay for what you did."'

'It's hateful,' said Saskia, dropping it as if it were red-hot. 'How could anyone be so cruel?'

'Quite easily, I'm afraid,' said Artemis. 'I suppose you know it's about me and Carl? I'm sure your mother's told you the story.'

'She told me a little,' said Saskia, blushing.

'The letter comes from the States, so that makes it even harder for the police to trace it. What really amazes me about these letters, though, is that so many, many people think of Carl as if he were still the age when he made his best films. Not that I should blame them, I suppose. He was amazingly attractive then.'

She smiled, far away.

'Odd that so much of my mail is either from women who see me as some sort of icon, a high-priestess of feminism, or else as a threat to the female sex generally. And all because of a love affair.'

She crumpled the letter into a ball.

'And odd too that it's come full circle. My giving him up made so many women of that generation loathe me, but among the young it's now seen as a point in my favour.'

'How did you give him up?' said Saskia, forgetting to be tactful. 'How could you? He was so gorgeous. And it's so hard to do something like that.'

'So you're beginning to find that out too?' said Artemis with a sympathetic look. 'It wasn't hard to deduce anyway. You've been behaving like Mariana in the moated grange ever since you got here. You'd better tell me all about it.'

Saskia gave a reluctant giggle and sat down on the edge of the bed.

'I met someone from the boys' boarding school near ours. The heads decided to let the over-fifteens have joint monthly discos, supervised of course, so they weren't really much fun. It's like a nunnery at school.'

'At least you all get some work done that way,' said Artemis. 'So you met him at one of these discos?'

'Yes,' said Saskia, 'and then he asked me out on my free afternoon.'

She looked at her feet, remembering the mad rush to get the lunch-time bus into Exeter, then changing into a

purple mohair sweater and a pair of home-bleached jeans in a public lavatory, and plastering on eye make-up in the cracked mirror.

They went to a hamburger bar, then on to the cinema. There in the back row she soon became aware his hands and lips were exploring her in a way that showed he wasn't concentrating on the film at all.

The sense of being part of an illicit romance was intoxicating, and it took no time at all to persuade herself that she was deeply in love. It was fun to show off about it to the girls in her dormitory, but not such fun when he inexplicably failed to show up after a few meetings.

'So how did you escape from school?' asked Artemis. 'I thought only the sixth form was allowed into town.'

'Pretended I needed to go to the public library to do research for a community history project.'

'And did a different sort of research instead,' said Artemis. 'That was clever of you. What went wrong?'

'He said he loved me,' blurted out Saskia. 'And then I discovered he was seeing this girl from a local comprehensive. She could go out any time she liked, and she had silver streaks in her hair and safety pin earrings. They're so stuffy at school – they won't even let us have pierced ears.'

Artemis looked grave, though a smile was tugging at the corners of her mouth. 'You don't really want to look like that, do you?' she asked gently. 'And it doesn't sound to me as if he was really right for you. I know it seems bad to you now, but you'll get over it.'

'I loved him. I'll never forget him,' said Saskia theatrically, though now she'd told Artemis about it the ache was already passing.

'You may surprise yourself one day,' said Artemis.

Saskia began to feel as if she might be growing up. Emboldened by a sudden rush of self-confidence, she decided to ask Artemis about her past.

'I know it's nothing like what happened to you,' she said tentatively. 'But how *did* you manage to give up Carl Sandstrom? Especially when you were so in love. I'd never be brave enough to do that.'

The room was silent, so that Saskia could hear the bees foraging in the honeysuckle beneath the window. Sunlight glinted on the silver-backed brush and hand mirror on the dressing table. A petal fell from a bowl of tea-roses, and lay on the dark polished wood.

Artemis's face was suddenly shuttered. All the vivacity had drained from it. Saskia felt dismayed, as if she'd been playing a game of grandmother's footsteps which had become something else entirely. She was thrown into panic by her great-aunt's reaction. Before she'd only dimly realised the difference between their two griefs. Now it was only too clear. She was terrified that she'd shattered their closeness. She flung herself forward, and wound her arms round Artemis's neck, burying her face in her hair.

'I'm sorry,' she said passionately. 'I never meant to hurt you. I'll never talk about it again, I swear.'

She drew back and anxiously scanned Artemis's face. Artemis smoothed a lock of hair gently back from Saskia's forehead, and smiled at her.

'I'm not angry,' she said. 'I'll tell you the whole story when you're older. But, yes, it was the hardest thing I ever did.'

'I expect you did it for his wife's sake,' said Saskia eagerly, most of whose ideas on the conduct of married life came from Victorian novels.

Artemis laughed gently and shook her head.

'Poor Yvette. She was in a sanatorium, and her mind had almost completely gone. No, I wasn't as self-sacrificing as that. I left Carl purely for myself, because ultimately it came to a choice between him and my work. And I chose my work.'

'But – but he was wonderful,' burst out Saskia. 'Even the girls at school rave over his old films. I don't understand.'

Artemis shook her head at Saskia.

'You will, one day.'

She flung back the bedclothes, and swung her pyjama-clad legs to the ground.

'And the weather's far too nice for such a gloomy conversation. How about a trip to the Forest of Dean?'

And that had been that. A moment later Mrs Adams, the housekeeper, bustled into the room, wanting to know if they needed a picnic, and it had been a long time before Saskia dared to bring up the subject again.

The rose bowl was empty now except for a few curtain hooks, and the silver hairbrush dull and tarnished. Saskia got up and wandered over to the wardrobe built into the oak-panelled wall. Artemis hated shopping for clothes, and tended to wear comfortable cashmere cardigans and slacks. They were all there, along with most of her beloved African caftans, and a ceremonial robe in clashing colours given her when she'd been made an honorary chief. The brass regalia mask accompanying it was still slung round the neck. Yet she'd also kept an enviable collection of evening dresses from the forties, most of them bought in Hollywood when she was living with Carl. They were there too, satins and sequins gleaming through neatly zipped plastic bags, the ghost of Artemis's scent still lingering among them.

Saskia closed the wardrobe door, and moved over to the window. It would seem strange at first to sleep in this room, but she'd always loved everything about it, from the wide balcony where at night you could see the city lights twinkling like a landlocked Milky Way, to the faded French hunting tapestries on the wall.

After she'd carried her cases upstairs, she went back to the drawing room. She put a few more logs on the fire,

and looked at her watch. It was still only ten o'clock, but she needed coffee urgently. She decided to go into Clifton village for a few groceries and something from a delicatessen for a simple lunch. She'd checked that the gas and electricity were turned on, and now she picked up the phone and heard a satisfactory purring sound. The moment she put the receiver down the phone rang.

'Saskia?' said Ben's voice. He sounded worried and conspiratorial. 'Thank Christ I caught you.'

'What's wrong? Is Morwenna there?'

'That's what I'm ringing about. We got back about half an hour ago. She's in one hell of a mood.'

'Why?' said Saskia, feeling for Ben. Morwenna's rare tempers were spectacular, and it was worth keeping out of her way until they subsided. 'She ought to be ecstatic with that new contract in the bag. I suppose a customs man said something sexist to her at the airport.'

'It's not that,' said Ben despairingly. 'I don't know what's wrong. Every time I try to talk to her she snaps my head off. And it's not just jet-lag.'

'Can I speak to her? Where is she?'

'In the shower,' said Ben. He sounded on the verge of a nervous breakdown. 'I made her a fabulous welcome home breakfast – slices of papaya in lime, and scrambled eggs with smoked salmon – but she tipped the whole lot in the waste bin. Then she actually cried.'

'Morwenna cried!' said Saskia in awe. That was something almost unheard of.

'Yes, she cried. And she still wouldn't talk to me. She said there was no way I'd understand. And now she's locked in the bathroom playing Public Enemy full blast, and when she gets out she'll be even more impossible. That music always fires her up.'

'Was everything all right between you before she went

to the States?' Saskia asked cautiously. 'I thought she'd seemed on edge.'

'She's been like it for a while now. It gets a bit much to take sometimes. I love that two jumps ahead self-confidence she has – it's what I fell for in the first place – but it seems to be turning against me, and I'm not sure why.'

'Shall I come over?' said Saskia.

'No,' said Ben hastily. 'I'm ringing to ask if I can bring her over to you. I'll tell her how worried you are about keeping Gilead going, and say you need her advice urgently. If we can get her interested in something else, maybe she'll give a little and tell us what's wrong.'

'Get here as soon as you can,' said Saskia. 'I'm just going into Clifton village to buy some food for lunch. Maybe that'll help as well.'

In the background she heard the music stop abruptly and then Morwenna's voice screaming for Ben.

'Oh God,' he said despairingly, 'I forgot to put out a towel for her. I must go. She said she was going to have a sleep afterwards, but if I know her it won't be for very long. We'll see you in a couple of hours.'

The narrow shopping streets of Clifton were thronged with people drawn out by the unexpected sunshine. Saskia managed to resist the lure of a boutique flaunting a display of floppy straw hats, the brims pinned back with bunches of silk anemones, but the antiques market was too much for her. She spent a long time poring over trays of Victorian jet and garnet, then talking to the owner of a lace stall. She finally came to when a clock in a furniture booth struck eleven, and she realised she'd still not bought any food.

When her shopping bag was full she decided to return to Gilead by a different route. As she walked down a side road, admiring a row of dignified Victorian houses,

her eye was caught by one larger than the rest. It stood back from the street, in a treeless expanse of asphalt like a school playground. The roof slates had been replaced with bright red tiles, the tall pointed windows altered to picture frames with one-way glass which gave the house a blind, secretive look. Behind the high security fence was a sign announcing the Clifton Happy Valley Home. Saskia shivered. It looked more like a prison than a home.

She hurried on into the normality of Victoria Square. University students were sprawled on the grass under the trees eating sandwiches, and one of them was picking out a tune on a guitar.

As she came out of the park on to the pavement at the corner of the square a dazzle of yellow attracted her. She looked again. An old-fashioned pram was packed tight with bunches of daffodils. The girl selling them was doing a roaring trade, wrapping the bunches in paper torn from a kitchen roll. As Saskia approached she caught the sharp powdery scent of the flowers.

Saskia recognised the girl immediately. It was Freddy, in a shapeless sweater almost to her knees, wasp-striped leggings, and a red scarf and mittens. At the back of the flowers she saw Jules, fast asleep, with his thumb plugged in his mouth.

Freddy automatically held out a bunch of flowers to Saskia, then recognised her as well. She gave a huge grin.

'I thought you were in London,' she said. 'What are you doing here?'

'I'm living in Bristol now. My great-aunt left me a house in Clifton.'

'But what about that guy you were living with, and your job?'

'Ditched them both,' said Saskia with an answering grin.

Freddy whistled.

'Heavy! So are you working here, or did your old auntie leave you lots of dosh too?'

'I'm going to set up my own film company if I can raise the money,' said Saskia. 'And how's Jules?'

'Turning into a right little tearaway. He's just starting to crawl, so things aren't so easy now. But I'm doing well with these early daffs.'

'Where did you get them?'

'From an old bloke over Leigh Woods way. I've been tidying up his orchard for him. The daffs were growing there, and he let me take them in exchange.'

Jules began to stir in the back of the pram, rubbing his eyes, and pulling down the corners of his mouth ominously.

'There'll be no peace now,' said Freddy resignedly. 'I'll take him home and feed him, then start again with the flowers this afternoon.'

'Where's home these days?'

'I'm staying with a mate down in Hotwells, but she's got to get out of her flat next week. It's the same old story. And where's this house of yours?'

'Just below Royal York Crescent. I'm going there now.'

'Very posh. I'll walk with you, if you like. It's on my way.'

They proceeded together through the side streets. Jules providentially fell asleep again, lulled by the movement of the pram. Freddy, prompted by more questions from Saskia, unfolded a sad little tale of camping in friends' bedsitters until they became exasperated, and then moving on.

'It's better than squats in the winter, anyway,' she said, 'but I get fed up having to keep Jules quiet all the time.'

She shot a sideways glance at Saskia.

'Sorry I didn't send you all the money you lent me. It's just that every time I get a bit saved up, Jules needs new clothes, or I have to buy my friends a bottle of plonk to keep them happy. But I will, especially now you're skint too.'

'Forget it, please,' said Saskia. They were walking along the pavement by Gilead's garden wall. 'Anyway, I'm not exactly skint. This is where I live.'

'Jesus,' said Freddy, craning up at the chimneys. 'It's a palace.'

Saskia put the key into the lock of the courtyard door.

'Come and have a look around,' she invited. 'There's a huge garden.'

They hauled the pram up the front steps, and Freddy followed Saskia, wheeling the pram through the hall to the drawing room, staring about her as she went. Saskia threw open the French window. Freddy left the pram just inside the door, and went on to the terrace. She gazed out over the garden, her face rapt.

'Gertrude Jekyll!' she said exultantly. 'Lutyens and Jekyll made this garden, didn't they?'

'But how did you know?' asked Saskia.

'Because of the plat – it's typical of her – and that brilliant stone pergola, just like the one at Hestercombe.'

The words were spilling out in her enthusiasm.

'The shallow rounded steps too, and the Moorish rill – Jekyll had a thing about them – and the archways that lead you on to see more and more. Please, I must look at the rest before Jules wakes up.'

She skipped down the steps, dragging Saskia after her.

'I did my final year project on Jekyll,' she said, 'and before my stepmother chucked me out I used to live near Hestercombe. That's one of her most famous gardens, just outside Taunton.'

She slowed down as they entered the first of the enclosed

gardens which led towards the long walk and the orangery. The walls of yew had sprouted wildly above the ragged box hedge which defined the flower beds, but the sun was bringing out a delicious astringent scent from the box leaves, and helping an army of bulbs unfurl pale green shoots.

'This must have been a spring garden,' said Freddy. 'Most of the smaller plots within Jekyll's main plan had special themes. You'd better get the hedges cut right away, though, or they'll go out of control.'

They moved on into the next enclosure. Roses ran riot over a semi-circle of shaky rustic posts by a lily-covered pool.

'Tea roses, China Garland, I should think,' said Freddy. 'She was nuts about them. The scent knocks you out in June. And look at these borders – all sorts of fantastic things here.'

She was hopping about, picking away leaves and twigs, rootling with her fingers, and giving satisfied little nods at what she found.

'Now, let's see what's next,' she said, bustling Saskia into the long walk, and pausing at the head of the brick path. On the left ran a waist-high raised flower-bed, last year's withered growth straggling to the ground. On the right a long herbaceous border defined the upper boundary of the plat.

'Brilliant!' said Freddy. 'It's text-book Jekyll. I'm pretty sure all this walk will be lined with shades of grey and white and mauve. She loved drifts of colour. She hated anything too formal. But if you don't start work on it soon you'll begin to lose the original design.'

An imperious wail floated towards them from the house. Jules had woken up.

'There he goes,' said Freddy ruefully, 'just when I'm into something interesting for once. The poor little kid

must be starving. I'm feeding him myself. It's cheaper that way.'

She gave a longing look round the rest of the garden, and began to walk back to the house.

'Why don't you stay a little and feed him by the fire?' said Saskia. 'I'll make us both some coffee.'

When she came into the drawing room with a laden tray Freddy was curled up on one of the sofas, with Jules tucked in the crook of her arm. She'd pulled up her sweater, and his hair seemed even darker against the pale skin of her breast. He sucked greedily, making small guzzling sounds. Freddy's face, gazing down at him, had momentarily lost its defensive, slightly truculent look.

Saskia put a mug of coffee on the table at Freddy's side, and a sugary doughnut oozing raspberry jam.

'Thanks, that looks great,' she said. 'The trouble with feeding him myself is that it makes me twice as hungry. But I meant it, you know, when I told you he was worth all the hassle. It's just a bit scary when I think about how I'm all he's got. And it's hard too, when I see a garden like this, and realise what I've given up.'

She pulled a piece of crumpled paper out of her jeans pocket, and thrust it at Saskia.

'Look, I've scribbled down a list of all the things I think need doing right away. But make sure you get a gardener who knows what he's up to. There are too many cowboys in this business. One person could manage with the right tools, and someone to help out with the heavy work.'

Saskia read the list, which was dauntingly long. She had already begun to feel like the princess and the briar hedge, as if she might be found hundreds of years hence, submerged beneath a mountain of greenery. But she had no time to attend to it herself, if she wanted to get on with the film, and no money to pay the sort

of gardener of whom Freddy and Miss Moxon would approve.

And though she wasn't frightened of being alone, when she'd gone to the kitchen to make the coffee, and peered again into the other downstairs rooms while she was waiting for the kettle to boil, she knew she was going to miss having friends around her. When she thought about Freddy's story it seemed almost immoral to keep such a huge place to herself.

Sitting there companionably with Freddy, the fire crackling in the hearth, another plan began to form in her mind. She looked up at Artemis's smiling face on the wall, and thought she'd approve.

'Freddy,' she said tentatively, 'would you – would you consider coming to live here with me in return for doing some work in the garden?'

Freddy clutched Jules so tightly that his eyes flew open.

'You're winding me up!' she said. 'You don't really mean it.'

'I'm not. And I do. The more I think about it, the better it seems. There's even a nursery suite upstairs. The decor's a bit Mary Poppins, but it has everything you'd need.'

'But you hardly know me at all. Most landladies'd want references from the chief constable for someone like me. They'd say I might bring in loads of squatters, or start pushing drugs. I bet your friends'd think you'd gone off your trolley.'

She looked so concerned that Saskia started to laugh.

'I'm not a landlady, and you're one of my friends as well. Though Morwenna probably will think I'm mad.'

'Who's she?'

'Another friend of mine. You'll meet her soon. You'd be doing me a favour, honestly, Freddy. I've no time to look after the garden, but it's got to be pulled into shape as

fast as possible. I need to use it for my film, and I need to keep the garden conservation gurus happy as well. You're like a gift from heaven, especially as you know so much about Gertrude Jekyll already.'

'What about my income support? I couldn't risk losing that, and I might if the social got to know about it.'

'We needn't tell anyone. Let's make it an unofficial arrangement between friends. Board and lodging in exchange for working in the garden whenever you've got time. I could give you some cash in hand if you find you're able to work more regularly.'

Jules was now squirming in Freddy's arms. She sat him on the rug, where he instantly rolled on to his stomach and started to crawl away across the carpet.

'It sounds all right,' said Freddy, 'but Jules is another reason why I might not be such a good choice for you. He's into everything these days. Still, I've got another friend with a baby who'd probably look after him part-time if I do evenings for her in return.'

She recaptured him and balanced him across her knees, where he continued to flail away, his limbs going like pistons.

'We've never had a place of our own,' she said. 'He's always been in the way. It can't be good for him to grow up like that.'

She put out her hand, and shook Saskia's gravely.

'It's a deal,' she said. 'You won't regret it. I won't rip you off. And I promise we'll keep out of your hair as much as possible. It shouldn't be hard in a huge place like this.'

'But I don't want you to keep away, except when I'm working. Look, I've got some other friends coming over shortly, and it is a sort of business lunch. I want to discuss one or two problems with them. So why don't you finish selling the flowers, and sort things out with your friend, then move in on Saturday, say

around tea-time? I could fetch your heavy stuff later in the car.'

'I haven't got any heavy stuff,' said Freddy, 'but thanks, that'd be great.'

She gave Jules a smacking kiss on the back of his neck.

'And he's not bad most of the time.' She patted his bottom and withdrew her hand hastily. 'Ugh, he's soaking. I'd better take him off before he ruins your auntie's sofa.'

She stood up, hoisting him against her shoulder. He smiled at Saskia, waving his hand at her.

'Honest, I'll make it the best garden in Bristol,' said Freddy. 'There'll be queues to see it by the time I'm done.'

Chapter 7

Saskia stood at the courtyard gate watching Freddy trundle Jules and the daffodils down the road towards Hotwells. Every instinct told her Freddy could be trusted, but she couldn't help wondering if she'd been too impetuous. There were other more pressing things to worry about for the moment, though, not least Ben and Morwenna.

She went back to the kitchen, hoping she could get the Esse and the central heating going before they appeared, but the fire obstinately refused to draw. She was washing soot from her hands when the doorbell rang.

Startled, not expecting the others quite so soon, she went to open it. The welcoming smile on her face fled when she saw LeValet standing there in a belted camelhair coat. He shone an easy smile at her. In the daylight his hair was a suspiciously uniform brown.

'My dear Saskia,' he said, 'I do hope you won't regard this as an intrusion, but I thought you might welcome a visitor. And I'm sure your mother would like to know you're safely settled in.'

He looked over his shoulder and snapped his fingers. The minder, who was lounging by the outer gate chewing a piece of gum, slouched forward with a bunch of flowers. He pushed them into Saskia's arms before retreating to his original post.

Saskia looked down at them. They were orchids, the flowers she disliked most, wired into a huge spray, and swathed in yards of cellophane and shiny purple ribbon.

'Your mother's such an old friend that I'm sure you won't mind if I greet you properly,' he said.

He placed his gloved hands on her shoulders and kissed her cheek. His skin felt as smooth as a woman's, and smelt of some suffocatingly musky aftershave. She instinctively recoiled, and as she did so he stepped neatly past her into the hall.

She was furious at his effrontery. It was unnerving to see him standing there, eyeing the contents as though he was pricing them, but she made herself stay calm. She threw the flowers down on the chest.

'Neither you nor my mother need have worried. I'm perfectly capable of managing here. And I am very busy at the moment.'

He didn't take the hint.

'I'm not surprised you're busy. This is a very large property for a young lady to take on single-handed. Your mother is bound to be worried,' he said.

'I'm not single-handed,' she said. 'I have other people staying with me.' She didn't want him to think she was living alone.

'Then I hope they're people you can rely on. One has to be careful these days.'

His eyes fell on the statue, and he peeled off a glove and thoughtfully touched one of its shoulders. His finger left a damp bloom on the polished wood. Idly he wandered over to the antiquated radiator beneath the oriel window, and pulled off a long curling strip of paint.

'You'll have endless problems with heating like this,' he said. 'One of my subsidiary companies could put in an excellent ducted air system for you, at a discount of course.'

'The radiators are quite adequate,' lied Saskia, watching helplessly as he moved past her towards the drawing room.

It was only too clear that he had no intention of leaving until he was quite ready. She followed him, and as he stood in the centre of the room it seemed to her as if his assessing gaze was contaminating everything it fell on. She wanted to scream at him to go.

'I shouldn't be surprised if there's more than a touch of dry rot here,' he said. He went over to the wall, and knocked knowledgeably on the panelling. 'It spreads like wild-fire in an old place like this. You may well have to replace most of the woodwork, including the roof.'

Saskia hated him even more for putting into words her suppressed worries about the house. She was fairly sure it was basically sound. Artemis had left instructions for its maintenance while she was abroad, but if some unexpected crisis like rot occurred she had no idea how she'd cope financially.

'But of course you don't really have to worry,' he said. 'My offer's still there. I'll willingly take the place off your hands when it becomes too much for you.'

'It won't become too much,' she said angrily. 'Artemis would have wanted me to live here, and keep it exactly as it was.'

'I do understand how you feel. I know how fond you were of her.'

He was looking at the frieze of Persephone. Saskia thought grimly that he'd probably like to tear it out and replace it with a chain-store print of a flamenco dancer.

'I met your great-aunt once,' he said. 'A most charming lady.'

'You met Artemis?' said Saskia in astonishment.

'Yes, she sometimes held open days here for charity. I was curious to meet her, and in any case I'm always glad to do what I can for a good cause. So you see, it's not as if you'd be selling to someone who was a complete stranger to your great-aunt. I flatter

myself that she was impressed by my range of interests.'

'I'm sure she was,' said Saskia drily.

'She was such a dedicated person,' said LeValet, 'and so devoted to the welfare of those poor natives she went to live with. And now I own the land next door, I feel sure she would have approved of my plans to use Gilead for the good of the whole community. Yes, I'm certain that's what she would have wanted in the long run.'

Saskia couldn't bear his soft insinuating voice a moment longer. He was rapidly spoiling all the pleasure of moving in.

'I really don't think it's got anything to do with you, Mr LeValet, and I've already told you that I'm extremely busy. I shall have to ask you to go now.'

He put his hand on her shoulder again. 'I do understand. You're tired and overwrought after the strain of moving. I just want you to remember that if you need any help, I'm always available, and that my offer stands indefinitely.'

To her intense relief, he went back slowly into the hall. Short of calling the police, she had no idea how she could have forced him and his minder to go. She flung open the front door. He lingered a moment on the step.

'I'm sure you'll see the sense in what I've been saying eventually,' he said. 'A young and beautiful woman like yourself shouldn't be burdened with a responsibility like this.'

As Saskia watched the outer gate close behind LeValet and his minder, she resolved to have an entry-phone installed at the first possible opportunity. She felt drained by the encounter, and went back to the kitchen to make herself some more coffee, very black and very strong. She longed to tell Ben and Morwenna about the incident, but that obviously wasn't going to be possible right away.

She'd need all her remaining energy to cope with their problems.

When they arrived fifteen minutes later, Morwenna was wearing an ex US air-force bomber jacket, black leather jeans and a furious expression. Ben had his own bulging carrier bag of groceries, and looked like an anxious mother hen.

Morwenna's face was pale with fatigue, but her green eyes flashed round the hall, taking in every detail. Saskia thought she was impressed in spite of herself, but it was never Morwenna's way to be too gushing.

'Well, get this,' she said. 'You could shoot a Gothic romance in here. But Christ, it's cold. That statue ought to have thermal underwear.'

She stalked on into the drawing room, and stood for a moment studying the frieze over the fireplace.

'My God, look at that,' she said. 'You've inherited a stately home, Sass. Where's the butler?'

Ben seemed almost shell-shocked, torn between admiration of the house and anxiety about Morwenna. He stood with his hand on the back of a sofa, absent-mindedly stroking the silky wool of the kelim, and watching her face.

Morwenna flung herself down on to the sofa, still staring around her. Then, for the first time, she smiled.

'Well, come on, what's the matter with you guys? Let's celebrate. I never thought I'd know a real live heiress. And I need a drink after that bloody awful flight.'

'Do you think you ought?' said Ben. 'It's not good for jet-lag. Something to eat would be better.'

'It's the best thing for jet-lag,' said Morwenna. 'And what do you know about it anyway, Ben my dear? You never go further than Farmer Mangel-wurzel's back yard. OK, Saskia and I'll have a drink, while you fix some lunch. I want to talk to her, anyway.'

Ben looked imploringly at Saskia.

'Would you, Ben?' she said. 'That'd be great. The kitchen's through the door at the back of the stairs, and down the corridor. I left another bag of food on the table. There's some wine and beer. Help yourself.'

As soon as he'd gone Saskia went over to a side table where she'd already set out glasses, a bottle of whisky, and some Malvern water. She poured Morwenna a liberal dose. She took the drink and downed half of it at once.

'Well, what's the problem?' she said. 'Ben made it sound as if the world'd come to an end if we didn't get over here right away.'

She was looking slightly less tense. Saskia decided not to ask her about her trip yet. Instead she sat on the sofa opposite, and launched into the history of Adrian's latest proposition, right up to the point where he told her that he was going to make the film about Artemis anyway.

'Typical Adrian,' said Morwenna. 'Well, at least you told him to stuff his offer. You have to keep at least three jumps ahead of guys like him. The bastards promise you everything, then pull the rug from under your feet.'

She went over to the window, glass in hand, and gazed out over the garden.

'They set me up in New York,' she said. Her voice was unsteady. 'I didn't get the contract – I didn't bloody get it! All that schlock about admiring my work on the prison film meant absolutely nothing. When I got to a final meeting with the top execs, they suddenly produced a kid fresh out of film school who'd done nothing but a few low-budget TV advertisements.'

She went over to the side table and slammed down her empty glass, making the Waterford crystal sing in protest.

'She was the company president's niece, so she got the job. I'd just been brought in as token competition. And

what made it even worse was that the guy who arranged it all, whom I really liked and trusted, and even thought I might take a little walk-out with, was having it off with this girl.'

She refilled her glass and stood looking down at it, swirling the whisky and water around angrily.

'I did a hell of a good job, too, on the previous job for Channel 4, and they'd even offered me more work over there on a film about the aftermath of the LA riots. But I turned it down because of the New York project. Then, when I ate crow to try to get the LA contract after all, it was too late.'

She stopped and looked at Saskia indignantly.

'For Christ's sake, why are you smiling? I thought at least you'd understand. I don't want sympathy – I can get enough of that from Ben – but I didn't expect you to be *pleased*.'

'Of course I understand,' said Saskia. 'But I *am* pleased. It couldn't be better. I'll tell you why if you'll calm down and listen for a moment.'

Morwenna went back to the sofa, and stretched out her legs to the fire.

'Just what are you hatching?' she said. 'It must be something good. I haven't seen you look so hyped up for ages.'

'I told Adrian I was going to set up my own film company and make a documentary about Artemis myself. Everything I need is here – the house as a background, all her papers, even her old African films. The budget could be kept to a minimum. There'd be hardly any location expenses if I use Artemis's own footage and stills.'

'Well, yes, great,' said Morwenna unenthusiastically, lighting up a cigarette. 'Good for you – go for it. I don't see what the problem is.'

'The problem was you, you idiot! But it isn't any more,

if you'll come in with me. There's no one I'd rather work with, or who'd do a better job. The subject can't possibly offend your principles, and look how much you know about Artemis already. Just think about it at least.'

Morwenna was at last beginning to look interested. She balanced the cigarette in an ashtray, and clasped her hands behind her head.

'It'd be fun to work together again. We haven't since film school. It's a pretty big gamble, though, with Adrian in the running too.'

'But haven't you just been telling me to go for it? Between us we could do a documentary that'd make his effort look like holiday snaps.'

'I am getting a bit bored with being known just for earthy action shots. I suppose a spot of culture would make quite a change. But I'm warning you, Saskia, it wouldn't be the usual soft-focus stuff.'

'Of course it wouldn't. That's been the trouble with the public's image of Artemis all along. They've never had a true picture of her.'

'You're right. We could give her story a really new slant, and this place would look fabulous on film. But I'd need to know the actual deal.'

'The deal?' echoed Saskia, adjusting to the idea that Morwenna really was in favour. She'd been fairly sure she could win her round, but there'd always been a chance she'd want to rush off to the nearest war, and demonstrate how much better she was than the company president's niece.

'The deal, slowcoach. Much as I love you, I'm not working for free. I still need that giro-zoom, and I've got Ben and a second mortgage to support. How are you going to finance the project? Would you give me a cut of the profits or pay me pro rata?'

'I hadn't really worked it out yet,' said Saskia. She'd

vaguely thought of some sort of partnership, but her mind had been preoccupied with the script.

'Typical,' said Morwenna. 'Then you'd better start working it out now. I suppose you've been too busy dreaming over the artistic message? Wake up, kid. It's a wicked world, and you need to make rock solid financial arrangements before we start. I've seen too many friendships end over something like this. How do you intend to raise the funds, anyway?'

'I thought I'd try to sell the idea to one of the independent channels, and back it up with an American tie-in.'

'That could take weeks, and if you want to beat Adrian to the post there's no time to spare. Do as I did, take out a mortgage, or get a bank loan if it's quicker.'

'But I couldn't possibly mortgage Gilead. It's a sort of sacred trust. God knows what Artemis would think.'

'She'd think it's a brilliant idea. You know she was a realist. And anyway, didn't you tell me that day you first went to see the solicitor that LeValet had offered you three-quarters of a million for the place? You might just do the film for seventy-five K, and that's a tenth of what Gilead's worth. It'd be even less if we took on some of the subsidiary production work ourselves.'

Saskia was silent, thinking it over.

'Well, do you or don't you want me to come in on it?' said Morwenna impatiently. 'I'll give it everything I've got, but you have to make the decisions, and tell me what's up front. It's your project.'

'Of course I do. And all right, I'll get a mortgage on Gilead,' said Saskia, knowing she must make up her mind before Morwenna lost interest. 'I was trying to work out how I could make you a really good offer. How about a partnership, and a half share of the royalties?'

'That's not fair,' said Morwenna. 'After all, you'd have the responsibility of the loan. And anyway I don't think

I want to be saddled with all the hassle of a company partnership. I might want to go abroad again afterwards. How about a thirty-five percent share of the profits, just on this film, and an advance to tide me and Ben over for the next six months? You could write in an option for me to come in on any later ideas I liked the sound of.'

'Done,' said Saskia.

She realised she was grinning like a Cheshire cat. It was a huge relief to have Morwenna on her side. The drawing-room door opened cautiously, and Ben peered round. His eyes went straight to Morwenna's face.

'Everything OK?' he said, gazing from her to Saskia. 'The food's ready. Is Morwenna feeling better?'

'There's been nothing wrong with me,' she snapped. 'I don't know how you got hold of that idea.'

'Good, good,' said Ben, looking as if he couldn't quite trust the news. 'So the States deal is all sewn up, then?'

'Oh, that!' said Morwenna airily. 'It wasn't my scene after all. I decided to give it a miss. Anyway, Saskia and I are on to something much better now.'

'What's that?' asked Ben.

'Saskia's decided to set up her own film company, here at Gilead. We're making a documentary together about Artemis Venner.'

Ben's face broke into a huge grin.

'Wonderful,' he said, rushing to kiss Saskia. 'Congratulations, both of you. I can't think why you didn't go in together ages ago.'

He tried to descend on Morwenna, but she shook him off impatiently. He looked hurt, then annoyed, but he attempted another smile, and turned back to Saskia.

'So what are you going to call the company?' he asked.

'Artemis Films,' said Saskia.

The name seemed exactly right as soon as she'd said it. She could even see in her mind the logo on the letterhead,

a Greek huntress embossed in black on heavy white paper, with a spotted hound at her heels.

'Well, what are we waiting for?' said Morwenna. 'We can settle all the details later, and I'm starving. Let's open that wine and celebrate.'

The heavy oak table was laid with a cream linen cloth Saskia had embroidered at school as a present for Artemis. She remembered only too well toiling over the yellow daisy-stitch flowers. The cutlery was worn Edwardian silver, relegated from the dining room, the plates blue and white ironstone, ornamented with a border of grazing cows and thatched cottages.

A black enamel saucepan simmered on the gas-stove, and Ben had lit the oven and left the door half open to warm up the room.

'I brought over some soup,' he said. 'This kitchen's like something out of Mrs Beeton, and there's even a herb garden outside, in a little courtyard of its own. Once the Esse's going, it'll make fabulous bread and daubes. Perfect for pears in red wine, too.'

'I haven't had much luck with the Esse so far,' said Saskia. 'It must have been installed when Artemis inherited the house. And you need the strength of ten to lug in the fuel, though the store's full of it. Anyway, I shan't have much time for housekeeping. We ought to get the film shown by October if we want to try for a BAFTA award.'

'BAFTA award?' said Morwenna. 'You are flying high. But I don't see why not.'

Ben ladled out mushrooom soup into their dishes, and added a sizzling heap of croutons to each one. He brought over a warm garlic loaf from the oven. Morwenna was wrestling with a corkscrew as she tried to open the wine. She waved him away when he came to help her, and

sloshed Beaujolais into kitchen tumblers. Saskia raised her glass to them.

'Here's to Artemis Films. And monster profits, at least enough to cover the loan.'

'You should end up with much more than that if your marketing's any good,' said Morwenna.

'Give me a chance. I've got to write a script first,' said Saskia. 'This is gorgeous soup, Ben, one of your best. You must show me how to make it.'

'I thought you weren't going to waste your time on things like that,' said Morwenna.

'We do have to eat,' said Saskia. 'Perhaps you can give me a hand,' she added mischievously. 'I hope you'll be here most days. We can use Artemis's study and the dark room to work in.'

'You won't get a BAFTA award flitting around in a pinny. I bet Adrian never touches a saucepan.'

'I'll think about that later. I must see Mr Elder tomorrow about a mortgage, and start to rough out the script. Why don't you come round the day after, when you've had time to crash out? You can take a proper look round the house and garden then, and we'll talk business afterwards.'

'You could really do with Ben here full-time as well,' said Morwenna. 'He could answer the phone and cook for us, and generally keep things going in the house. But I've an even better idea than that. Why don't we move in to Gilead with you while we're making the film? It'll be such a drag to have to go back to Redland if we have late night planning sessions.'

'It'd be marvellous,' said Saskia slowly. 'I can't think of anything I'd like more. But are you certain? You're always saying you need your own space.'

'There's more than enough room for us all, surely? And it'd only be for six months or so, after all.'

'How would it suit you, Ben?' asked Saskia. He'd

been listening to their conversation with an expression of growing dismay.

'Good of you to ask me at last,' he said. 'I do have things of my own to get on with, you know. The motorway picketing's just at a crucial stage. I promised I'd help again. I thought Morwenna would be back in the States.'

'Don't be so wet, Ben,' she said irritably. 'One person more or less on the picket line won't make any difference, but you could make all the difference to Artemis Films. We really need you.'

'That makes a change,' said Ben. 'You haven't shown much sign of needing me recently.'

Morwenna gave him a considering look, then sat by his side and wound one arm round his neck, pressing her cheek against his.

'Well, I do. You know me. I can't keep on saying it. Please, Ben, darling Ben, promise you'll do it.'

She put her head on his shoulder and smiled up at him, her eyes cajoling. Morwenna in a rare soft mood was irresistible, like a tawny lion cub who'd consented for once to play.

'All right,' Ben said, looking longingly at her, 'but only if I can have a clear run in the kitchen. And only if you swear to turn up for meals on time when you're working here.'

Morwenna smiled complacently, and reached out to refill her glass.

'Are you absolutely sure, Ben?' Saskia asked.

She knew how much he loved the kitchen in Morwenna's flat, which he'd transformed into an unlikely replica of something out of a Provençal farmhouse.

'Of course he's sure,' said Morwenna. 'Don't make him throw another wobbly.'

She detached herself from him, and took a hunk of garlic bread. He got up and fetched a slab of Wensleydale

cheese and a plate of pepper salami from the dresser. He still looked worried.

'I'd pay you, of course, then at least you'd be a proper member of the team,' Saskia said to him. 'I can claim it as expenses for set maintenance and catering for the crew.'

'Perfectly valid,' said Morwenna.

'I might still have to picket one or two weekends,' he said stubbornly. 'I can't let them down altogether.'

'This could be just as valuable,' said Saskia. 'If you help us you're fighting Adrian and the reign of corporate power. We're sure to need some really stylish business lunches too. And it'd be wonderful to have someone to vet visitors. LeValet's been pestering me again, but I'll tell you about that later.'

'We can set things going with a huge publicity thrash,' said Morwenna.

'No publicity thrash yet,' Saskia said firmly, 'I don't want hordes of reporters poking round at Gilead, and writing even more rubbish about Artemis.'

'You can never have too much publicity,' said Morwenna.

'Maybe not if you're already well established, but the wrong sort would disastrous for us just now. We can have a launch when the film's finished. We'll cook up a really glossy promotion hand-out for the press.'

'And a mouth-watering presentation video,' said Morwenna.

'And I'll do a buffet - something really sumptuous,' Ben added eagerly.

'The press'll go ape over it!' said Morwenna.

In her excitement she was absent-mindedly slapping chili pickle and a large dollop of mustard on her salami sandwich. Ben winced. She bit into it as she looked expectantly at Saskia, waiting for her response.

'Come on, Sass, stop dreaming again. Christ, Ben, why did you buy such hot salami?'

She glared at him, and took a hasty gulp of wine.

'I'm not dreaming,' said Saskia excitedly. 'Why don't we do a book tie-in with the programme? We can use archive material from Gilead interleaved with stills from the film. I shan't have to write much copy. The photos would speak for themselves.'

'Even better,' said Morwenna. 'Those book tie-ins sometimes make more money than the films. You might be able to put in a decent central heating system. But there is one major problem about a book.'

'What?' said Saskia. 'Getting everything done in time seems the only major problem to me.'

'You'd need good recent pictures of Artemis. And the only person who has those that I know of is Munro Hawkshaw. That one he took of her on the donkey would be absolutely perfect for promotion, and for the back cover of the book jacket.'

'He wouldn't let me near his work. He thinks I'm tarred with the same brush as Adrian. And his reproduction fees will be enormous.'

'Don't you start throwing a wobbly as well. At least he condescended to talk to you at The Watershed, so you have established some sort of communication. He lives out in the Vale of Severn. You'd better get over there tomorrow and start chatting him up. If you go through his London agent it'll take forever.'

'But you said yourself he was a prize bastard,' countered Saskia. 'And besides, I met him again recently in Clifton, and he hadn't got any easier to handle.'

She had no wish to tell Morwenna about the even less satisfactory encounter with Munro in the cathedral.

'If you want the book to be the best, you'll do it,' said Morwenna. 'And there's nothing better than those photos of his. Anyway, prize bastards are there to be used. This is business. All you've got to do is look in *Who's Who?* His

phone number's probably ex-directory, but his address'll be there, and his agent says he hardly ever leaves home these days. It won't take long.'

'But I've enough to do already tomorrow.'

'Adrian's probably got some hot-shot London PR agency working on his promotion brochure this very minute,' said Morwenna. 'And those photos would make all the difference.'

Saskia swallowed hard.

'All right, I'll make the supreme sacrifice, just this once. But if he agrees, we work through his agent from then on. I want as little to do with him as possible.'

Chapter 8

Next morning Saskia visited Mr Elder yet again. She found him practising swings with his golf club on the office carpet. He stopped, embarrassed, as she entered the room, and launched into solicitous inquiries as to her well-being at Gilead.

'Everything's fine, Mr Elder,' she assured him. 'I just wanted your advice on a business project.'

He beamed, and slid behind his desk. 'Of course, my dear. I thought you might need a little help eventually. Do tell me all about it.'

She sat down, and drew out her notes from her briefcase. As she outlined her plans for setting up her own film company he looked increasingly thunderstruck.

'Isn't it rather an ambitious undertaking? What would this film be about?'

Patiently she explained, and he began to look slightly more enthusiastic.

'I can see that it would be an ideal subject for you. And it could prove an excellent investment of capital once the profits start to accrue. But how do you propose to fund your company?'

'I thought I could take out a mortgage on Gilead,' she said tentatively.

Doubt spread over his face again.

'It is possible,' he said, 'but I do feel it's rather unwise. Don't forget that you have no business experience, and your ability to pay off a mortgage would depend on your

success in running the company. Isn't there any way you could raise the money other than by getting yourself into debt? Couldn't you sell part of the garden, for instance?'

'I've thought of that, but it's too risky. Whoever bought it might sell on to LeValet.'

He looked at her, sighed, and smiled.

'I'm beginning to understand just how much you dislike Mr LeValet. Then a mortgage it'll have to be. But I'd be happier about the whole thing if you first prepared a proper business plan, and discussed it with a reputable accountant.'

'Naturally I would. I presume I could get a mortgage from a building society fairly easily?'

'Credit flow isn't as good as it was, but I don't see any problem. The money could take some time to come through, though, and you say you're in a hurry to start the film.'

'I'm on a tight schedule. I want to complete it by the end of September.'

'In that case, have you considered a private mortgage? This firm can arrange it for you. We have several clients interested in such schemes.'

'What sort of client?' she said suspiciously. 'Not LeValet?'

'Of course not,' he said in a soothing tone. 'I have in mind a Mr Sainthill, a local businessman, and most reliable in every way. He's a member of our congregation. I can vouch for him personally. Bearing in mind the value of Gilead, it would be a cast-iron investment for part of his retirement lump sum, and he has the money available now.'

'It seems reasonable,' she said cautiously, wondering if Mr Elder's firm would expect a huge fee for the introduction.

'Let me explain to you exactly what the procedure would be,' he said.

It sounded not much different to her from any other kind of mortgage, and after a short discussion she decided to take the plunge. The main problem was going to be the rate of interest. Even though it was slightly lower than the current rate, it was still so astronomical that the repayments would eat up several thousand pounds of the loan just in the six months it would take to make the film. It was clear she was going to need every penny she could make out of the enterprise.

Spurred on by this thought, she decided it was now or never to visit Munro Hawkshaw. She rushed home to change out of her suit into jeans and an old grey cashmere sweater of Artemis's. At the last moment, as she was throwing on her trench coat, she stuffed a video cassette of her most recent documentary into a pocket. It might just convince him that she wouldn't use his photos in the way Adrian had done.

She'd already looked up his address in the public library. When she consulted one of Artemis's old ordnance survey maps she found the house, Shipaground Farm, actually marked there, several miles beyond a tiny village called Water Netherne, and just below a meandering loop in the Severn.

It was the first day of March, the weather alternating typically between snatches of sunshine and blustery showers. As she drove into Gloucestershire the Cotswolds were a hazy purple like the bloom on a plum, against a charcoal backdrop of rain-filled cloud. Yet to the west the Severn shone in the sun, and beyond it the Welsh hills were an intense blue, their tops dusted with snow.

In spite of the purpose of her expedition she felt her spirits rise. She'd spent an unexpectedly lonely first night at Gilead, trying to convince herself that every odd noise was not a burglar, and trying not to long for the arrival of the others on Saturday.

Water Netherne, when eventually she reached it, had acquired a small housing estate since Artemis's map was made. She rattled past a pub and a village shop selling videos and Severn salmon, then was out in the countryside again. The landscape became emptier and flatter. The road unwound between straggly hawthorn hedges, behind which was a patchwork of small fields where cows grazed on new spring grass.

She'd gone on like this for about two miles, driving almost automatically as she made a mental list of all the things she must discuss with Morwenna the next day, when she began to notice a startling change in the scenery.

The hedges had been ruthlessly rooted out and replaced with high barbed-wire fences. The fields were one huge prairie sown with endless rows of winter wheat. A tractor was spraying a recently ploughed strip of land with a cloud of pesticide. In the distance she could hear the regular explosion of a bird scarer.

After another half mile a sign loomed up on the verge, announcing a turning. She saw identical scarlet lettering to the hoarding on the derelict land next to Gilead. 'LeValet Enterprises – Home Farm', it announced. Edging the farm track an avenue of savagely pollarded poplars, stumps of branches like clenched fists against the sky, led towards distant silo towers, their galvanised metal sides blindingly bright in the sun. Saskia stopped the car just before the turning, and wound down the nearside window to take a better look.

Now she could hear something other than the bird scarer. A tall open-sided lorry was careering towards her down the farm track. What looked like snow drifted from the swaying load, but as it approached, she saw, horrified, that the snow was feathers. The lorry was crammed with wire crates of live chickens. Through the mesh protruded

helpless legs, torn wings, and worst of all, heads with gaping beaks and terrified eyes.

Any sound they might have made was drowned by the blare of the driver's radio. He tore through the gate, took the bend at an unbelievable angle, and just avoided Saskia by a hair's breadth, rocking the Beetle in the lorry's slipstream. He gave her an angry two-finger sign, and hurtled off in the direction of the main road.

Silence fell. A cloud of dust and feathers drifted round the Beetle. Saskia got out and stared after the lorry, too shaken even to sound her horn in return. The stench of chicken droppings and diesel fuel hung in the air. Eventually she returned to the car and drove on at a sober pace, wondering what other creatures were eking out a miserable existence behind the barbed wire. More than ever she was glad she'd refused LeValet's offer.

The wire fence ended at last, and the landscape reverted to normal, running through pastures full of lambs. The road began to rise gently uphill, bordered on one side by an ancient coppice of overgrown Spanish chestnut. Among the fallen branches and old man's beard she almost missed a disintegrating sign nailed to a post, which said 'Shipaground Farm', and pointed to a narrow side track.

Cautiously she started along it. The surface was pitted with holes, and the Beetle began to develop some worrying noises. She wondered if it was going to be worth paying for the photos with the total collapse of the car.

At the end of the copse the view opened into fallow land dotted with staghorn oak. Then the track began to wind through an apple orchard. At least half the trees were lying drunkenly on their sides, supported by gnarled branches resting in the grass. As the trees thinned she saw the farmhouse, tall and steep-gabled, with crumbling plasterwork, and roof tiles blotched with yellow lichen.

In the low walled front garden a blackthorn was in full bloom.

On one side of the house the land slipped away across pasture to the Severn and the hills beyond. On the other was a ramshackle collection of outbuildings with a mud-spattered Landrover parked on the forecourt. Her way was barred by a sturdy padlocked gate and another sign with the words 'Strictly private. Visitors by appointment only'. She parked the car in front of it, rattled the gate and shouted to no effect, then in exasperation climbed over.

A steady thudding noise was coming from the open door of a barn. A black labrador with greying jowls lay across the threshold. He looked up at her approach, and limped stiffly forward to greet her.

She peered cautiously into the barn. It was lit by dusty windows high in the gables. A rakish white Citroën straight out of a seventies French cops and robbers movie was parked at the far end. Against one wall was a heap of apple branches, and a pile of logs.

With a long-handled axe Munro was systematically chopping the larger logs in half, and stacking them neatly into another pile. His movements were precise and controlled, but as he repeatedly tried to split one particularly knotty log he brought the axe down with enough force to sever a whole tree.

The dog gave a wheezing bark. Munro looked up and saw Saskia. His face, which had been impersonally intent on the work, became hostile. He went on chopping, and then, as the log still resisted the axe, kicked it away in exasperation.

He came forward, wiping his hands on the sides of his jeans. The corduroy ribbing was worn away at the knees, and his blue check shirt had a split in the seam.

'Didn't you see the notice?' he asked.

'I would have made an appointment,' she said, 'but you're ex-directory.'

'That's the whole point. You're supposed to go through my agent.'

'That would have taken too long.'

He came out into the yard, rolling down his sleeves, and glancing at the sky which had become ominously grey. His jaw was dark with a strong growth of stubble that owed nothing to any designer.

'Well, now you're here, what do you want? Get on with it. It's going to rain.'

He obviously wasn't going to ask her into the house. She consoled herself with the thought that it was probably the usual bachelor slum. As if he'd ordered it, rain began to sweep in from the river.

'It's to do with Artemis,' she said, hoping the name would mollify him. 'I'm setting up my own production company at Gilead. My first film's going to be about her.'

'And so?' he said. He didn't budge, though his shirt was already darkening with rain.

'I want to do a book tie-in. I was hoping I could use your photos of Artemis after all. There are plenty of other photos at Gilead, of course, but no recent ones.'

'But I offered once and you refused.'

He was obviously enjoying himself. It took all her resolution to continue pleading with him.

'I'm trying to explain. This is business. This is different. I'll pay you the going rate, of course.'

'So being business makes it all right,' he suddenly exploded. 'Well, it doesn't for me. In fact it makes me even less keen to let you have them.'

'You're prejudiced because I worked for Adrian,' she said. 'Why won't you believe me when I tell you I'm not like him? I've brought a cassette of my last

film with me. If you'd just look at it you'd realise that.'

'The last thing I want to do is waste time running through some trash from Metropolis. It'd make no difference, anyway. I told you I've made up my mind.'

'But your stills would make all the difference to the film about Artemis. It'd be incomplete without them. They're the best photos of her I've seen.'

She hated him for making her acknowledge how good his work was.

'I know they are, and you're not getting them. So why don't you go back to Bristol and try chatting up someone else? I want my breakfast.'

He flung open the garden gate, and disappeared up the path into the house. The dog gave her an apologetic look and followed him.

She marched angrily back to the car and got inside. Rain drummed on the roof. She considered having one more attempt, then told herself that nothing was worth having to grovel again. She slammed the door, and turned the key in the starter. It gave a complaining metallic sigh, then there was silence. She tried it again and again until the smell of petrol flooding the engine forced her to stop.

She went out into the rain once more. She knew from bitter experience that if she investigated the engine she'd simply end up with her hands covered in oil and no wiser about what was wrong. She clambered back over the gate, and went towards the farmhouse. The front door was firmly shut, but she hammered on it with her fist, and gave it a kick for good measure.

It opened so suddenly that she almost fell inside. Munro had dried his hair and was wearing a navy blue guernsey. A wave of warm air and the smell of coffee came from the room behind him.

'What is it now?' he asked.

'My car's packed up. It won't start.'

He shrugged. 'Fix it, then. Aren't these the days of equal opportunity?'

'I can't,' she said. 'I'm no bloody good at fixing cars, if you must know. And it's nothing to do with being a woman, before you make any more snide remarks. Plenty of men can't mend cars either. Just let me call the AA on your phone.'

'And have you hanging round here waiting for them, and trying to work on me again? Nothing doing. It's my bet there's absolutely nothing wrong with it, anyway.'

'If you don't believe me, come and see for yourself,' she flung at him. 'Otherwise I'll walk to the village and get a taxi back to Bristol. I've no wish to waste time here. You'll just have to put up with my car blocking your gate until someone can fetch it for me.'

Though the rain had turned to sleet she was determined to hold her ground. She'd been tactless at their last meeting, but that didn't warrant this incredible rudeness. He stared at her appraisingly, and finally shrugged his shoulders again.

'All right, I'll take a look,' he said. 'I suppose it'll be less trouble in the long run than towing it off the track with the Landrover.'

He disappeared for a moment, and returned in a muddy waterproof jacket.

'Come on, then. Let's get it over.'

He opened the gate with a key taken from his pocket. The wind was whining through the branches in the orchard, and sleet lashed her face. She dragged a pair of old leather gloves from her pocket and put them on.

He got into the car and tried the starter. It gave a short wheeze this time, then lapsed into permanent silence. He went round to the back and lifted the bonnet, studying

the engine. She peered in at his side, trying to look knowledgeable.

'You can't have had this serviced for months. The plugs are filthy,' he said. 'And the fan belt's loose. Where's your spare? I'll change it for you.'

'I don't have a spare,' she said. 'I'm not likely to go around with half a workshop in the back.'

'It's only common-sense to carry a spare of something so basic. So, you'd better walk into the village after all.'

She glared at him. 'All right, I will. But not before you've apologised for not believing me. I told you it wouldn't work.'

The sleet had turned to hail, and was gusting in stinging sheets across the orchard and rattling on the car. Her boots were heavy with mud, and she could feel her hair settling into rat's-tails.

'Why the hell should I apologise when you obviously haven't looked after it properly? People like you shouldn't own cars.'

'OK, go back to your cosy little bolt-hole,' she shouted at him. It was difficult to hear or see anything through the hail. 'Do a Heathcliff if you like, it doesn't impress me. People like you don't deserve other people anyway.'

Munro glared at her. He lowered the bonnet lid half way and then dropped it into place. She'd forgotten her hand was resting on the side rim of the engine well. The lid crashed down across the back of her fingers.

She reeled, feeling sick and faint with the impact. She sat down on the wet bank, and cradled her hand in her lap, rocking back and forth with pain.

'For Christ's sake, what's wrong now?' said his impatient voice above her.

For a few moments she couldn't answer, but gradually the initial crushing pain began to subside into something slightly more manageable.

'You shut the lid on my hand, you bastard,' she said between clenched teeth. 'Couldn't you think of a subtler way of getting rid of me?'

'Let me look,' he said in a slightly milder tone. 'Why on earth didn't you move it? Anyone could see I was closing the lid.'

'Anyone could see my hand was there,' she managed to reply.

'Not in this hail, with your coat flapping about, and you in a huff. You'd better come back to the house and let me see the damage.'

She was beginning to feel a little better. At least the glove was thick, and had cushioned the worst of the blow. She stood up, holding her hand in the front of her coat.

'No, I'll walk back to the village,' she said, hoping she wouldn't spoil the effect by having to sit down again. 'I mean it. Why should I put up with your bad temper just because you're supposed to have some sodding psychic wound?'

She knew the words were cruel, but she didn't care. He gave her another long look, shoulders hunched against the hail, but she didn't get the reaction from him she'd been waiting for.

'Psychic wound?' he said slowly. He looked almost amused. 'That's a good one. All right, I'm sorry. You were right about the car. So why don't you come inside now? Otherwise you'll end up as a snowman.' He gave her a half smile. 'Or should I say snowperson?'

It wasn't much of an apology, but it would have to do. She longed for warmth too much. She gave in, and followed him back through the garden and into an enclosed porch.

'Leave your wet things here,' he said over his shoulder.

He hooked his jacket over a peg and disappeared

through an inner door. She shrugged her injured hand cautiously through the arm of her coat, and kicked off her boots. The gloves took longer to remove, for she still dared not flex her bruised fingers.

The farmhouse kitchen was a confusing mixture of old and new. The furniture appeared not to have changed for at least forty years. There were two sagging armchairs upholstered in wine-coloured moquette, one with a gaudy crocheted blanket thrown over its back. A station clock ticked away ponderously on the wall. Under a window which overlooked the courtyard stood a deep earthenware sink and wooden draining board. Across the room by another window was a bulbous-legged table covered with cracked oilcloth. An A4 pad and some photos were scattered across it.

But the stove was brand new, a large royal blue Aga, with an impressive array of ovens and hotplates. It gave off a splendid blast of heat which she could feel even by the door. And on a dresser with peeling sludge-coloured paint, next to a state-of-the-art CD player, a sleek Italian coffee machine simmered noiselessly away.

Munro stood watching her reaction with a mixture of amusement and concern. She'd walked into the room as if it might be booby trapped. It probably seemed like something out of the ark to her, though it suited him perfectly at the moment to live with the shabby furniture belonging to the old farmer who'd sold him the house.

He tried to get a look at her hand, but she was holding it cradled in the crook of her other arm. She was still very pale as she sat down a little too quickly in one of the armchairs by the Aga. The dog, who'd been dozing there on a sheepskin rug, shifted his position and flopped his head on her feet.

'What's he called?' she asked.

At least she was being slightly less aggressive now, he

thought. He enlarged on the staccato reply he'd been going to give her.

'Blackie. Not very imaginative, but I inherited him from the man who lived here before me.'

'Didn't he want him any more?'

'His wife died last year. He was moving in with his daughter, and she didn't like pets. They were going to put the dog down.'

She looked at him as suspiciously as if she'd discovered Torquemada performing a kindly act, but the cutting remark he expected did not materialise.

She pulled her damaged hand from the crook of her arm, and laid it cautiously on her knee, sighing involuntarily as she did so. He took a quick look at it as she bent down to fondle the dog's head with her good hand. Her fingers were red and swollen, but they were all correctly aligned. When she'd finished stroking the dog she flexed them cautiously with a small grimace, then looked up and caught him watching her.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'It really wasn't pre-meditated. I'm not quite such a bad-tempered bastard as you think.'

She blushed. He remembered she'd blushed before in the pub. It wasn't often he saw a woman do that these days, and he found it oddly disarming.

The coffee was ready, and the smell reminded Munro again that he hadn't eaten since lunchtime yesterday. He'd developed some old film from Ethiopia in the evening. There had been unexpected pictures of Sabah. Over the last few weeks he'd been drinking very little, but the jolt of seeing her smiling up at him from the contact prints led again to too much whisky and another missed meal. It had been a mistake, because he always felt even more wretched the next morning. He knew he'd reacted irrationally to Saskia's visit because of it.

'Are you doing another book?' she asked as he began to clear the table and set out milk and sugar.

'Trying to,' he said. 'I want to write about Ethiopia, but it won't work, probably because it's all too close still. But I ought to publish the photos soon, before people begin to forget.'

He poured out a mug of coffee and took it over to her, placing it by her side in the hearth. She leaned back in the chair and smiled her thanks. Her hair was beginning to dry. She'd twisted it back behind her head, but it still fell in long curling strands round her ears. The silvery grey wool of her sweater clung softly like plumage to the curve of her breasts. He didn't usually have such high-flown thoughts, but as she rested in the ugly chair she reminded him of some exotic bird blown in by the storm. He'd have liked to take some photos of her.

He realised with a slight shock that she was the first young woman to come into the room since he'd bought the place. He remembered the day he'd first seen it, walking round with the estate agent and scarcely registering anything except its isolation and tranquillity. That had been all he craved then.

He'd had few visitors except for the workmen who'd installed the Aga, and his mother, who knew nothing about Sabah. He'd told his family he was taking a sabbatical to get over recurrent malaria, which was partly true.

'How's your hand?' he said.

She flexed the fingers again.

'Getting better,' she answered. 'If you show me where the phone is I'll ring the AA.'

Oddly and perversely he now didn't want her to go.

'I'll start the car for you,' he said. 'Will you stay and have something to eat?'

He returned to the table, keeping his back to her

while he waited for her answer, starting to lay out knives and forks.

Saskia watched, puzzled by this unexpected change in his attitude.

'You don't have to entertain me. You've been saying all along you don't want visitors.'

He turned. 'Perhaps it's time the Heathcliff phase finished,' he said, with a slight smile. 'Please. I'd like you to stay.'

'I shouldn't have said that,' she answered embarrassed. 'But you weren't exactly hanging out the welcome sign. All right, I'll stay. Thank you.'

He put a large iron frying pan on one of the Aga hotplates, and went to fetch bacon and eggs from the fridge. He laid the rashers neatly in the pan, and began to slice tomatoes.

The pain in Saskia's fingers had subsided to a dull ache which it was becoming easier to ignore. Outside the hail had given way to more heavy rain, but the walls were thick and all she could hear was a muffled pattering on the windows. Though the room was so unprepossessing there was something soothing in its lack of pretension, and she understood why he liked it. It demanded no emotional response.

She got up and went over to the dresser where postcards and a few photos were tucked haphazardly among the china. Only one was framed, a photo of a young African woman with her hair plaited back from a broad almost childlike forehead. She sat on the step of a Landrover, laughing at the photographer, a Kalashnikov propped by her side.

'Is this Sabah?' said Saskia tentatively. 'And did you take it?'

He turned briefly, then went back to slicing tomatoes. 'Yes, and yes,' he said flatly.

'Where was it? In Tigray?'

'Just outside Addis, about ten months ago. The day before she was shot. A sniper's bullet got her.'

She replaced the photo and went to sit at the table, watching him crack eggs too carefully into the pan. She got an impression of suppressed anger and despair. Partly to distract him, partly because it might let him know that she understood, she decided to tell him about her father.

'My father died suddenly when I was nine,' she said. 'I was with him at the time. My mother went to pieces afterwards.'

He turned from his cooking at that.

'Tough for you,' he said. 'What happened exactly? You say you were with him.'

'We were in a car crash, on a cliff road in Cornwall. He died at once, but it took the rescue people about an hour to get me out of the car. It was jammed between two rocks, half over the cliff above the sea.'

He grimaced.

'Pretty traumatic. I've seen African children after a shock like that. They can clam up completely, sometimes for years.'

'I did too. I was afraid to let myself feel anything. I felt I'd fall apart like my mother. I was only able to talk about it months later to Artemis.'

'So your father's death was your psychic wound?'

His voice was gently ironic.

'I'm sorry,' she answered awkwardly. 'That was completely insensitive of me.'

'It doesn't matter. Tell me more about this film you're going to make about Artemis. Have you started the script yet?'

He'd changed the subject, but somehow the conversation had subtly altered the atmosphere between them. He seemed at last to relax as he moved about between

the stove and the table, listening to her. His face became expressive and interested, and perhaps because he'd known Artemis he seemed to understand exactly what she wanted to convey in the film.

He dished up the food with casual competence, not bothering to arrange it as Ben would have done. A willow-patterned carving dish was put on the table, laden with eggs and bacon. There was a succulent pile of mushrooms, dark with melted butter, as well as the tomatoes, and a rack of toast to go with it.

'Can you manage?' he asked. 'I don't imagine you want me to cut up your food for you.'

She shook her head, smiling. He sat down and poured out more coffee.

'So, to return to the film,' he said. 'Let me see if I've got the situation clear. It has to be made fast to knock out the opposition, it has to make you a fortune to save you from the jaws of the loan sharks, and presumably you wouldn't mind a BAFTA award just to round things off?'

She laughed. 'It sounds like mission impossible put that way. I hope it won't be.'

'The book tie-in's a good idea. It'll take up even more of your time, but just a few weeks on the best-seller list would make all the difference to your profits. How do you plan to slant it?'

'Masses of photos – I know that'll make it expensive, but if people like the film enough, they'll buy. I'm not going to have much text, and what there is will use Artemis's own words whenever possible.'

'You'll need to find a publisher who's used to that sort of thing. The marketing'll have to tie in very precisely with the transmission date.'

They talked about publishing, and his own books, until the food had gone. As he was clearing away the dishes she

looked up at the clock, and was astounded to discover that it was already mid-afternoon.

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'but I really must go. I'd no idea it was so late. I've got to work out a business plan.'

She glanced out of the window by the table. The sun had reappeared. After the rain the grass sparkled like green quartz.

'Come and have a look at the river before you leave,' he said. 'It needn't take long, and you may as well see the estate, such as it is, while you're here.'

The air outside was cold and fresh, with a last few clouds sailing across a washed-out sky. They went through a kitchen garden, where rows of unkempt raspberry bushes sprouted canes like long grey whips, and cabbages were bursting into huge rosettes.

He opened a gate into an adjoining field.

'I own the land behind the farm as far as the river, but it's not grazed at the moment,' he said. 'The coppice by the road is mine too. I'm going to thin it out when I've dealt with the orchard.'

They began to walk along the edge of a fast-flowing stream, where the muddy water swirled between banks of withered sedge. Alder trees laden with clusters of black cones leaned towards the flood. A pair of mallards flew up clumsily at their approach. Saskia thought how different it must be from the arid landscape he was used to.

'Are you going back to Africa?' she asked.

'Maybe. When I left I never wanted to see another corpse or another starving child. After Sabah died I felt I'd used up all my emotions. Even the photos I took then were dead. But that sort of life, however sure you are that you've given it up, is a kind of addiction. In the last few weeks I've begun to think of it again.'

'If Sabah had lived, what would you have done?'

'We'd have lived in Africa, in Nairobi, and I intended

to move on to another kind of photography. There's no incentive to do that now, but there's nothing to keep me in England either, except this place. I'll leave the final decision for a few months, until I've got my book together.'

'What about your family?'

'They're middle-class Yorkshire folk, with a strong belief in the virtue of sticking to a steady job, if there is such a thing these days, and a distrust of the unusual. Luckily my brother's a solicitor and a credit to them all. My father understands about the travel side of it – he was in the regular army – but he's retired now, and more interested in gardening. They never knew about Sabah – not that they're racist in any way – but they'd have seen the relationship as more proof of my not being able to conform.'

Saskia felt a sneaking sympathy for Munro's family.

'They must be proud of you all the same,' she said. 'They must know your photos are the best.'

'Thank you,' he said. 'That's praise indeed. Yes, I suppose they are pleased on the whole, but my mother murmurs every now and then how much nicer it would be if I changed to landscape photography, and my father drops dark hints about the effects of an undisciplined life style. He's forgotten that if you aren't disciplined in my line of work you don't survive.'

Saskia shivered.

'Are you cold again?' he said. 'We won't stay long. But look up there – Canada geese.'

A ragged skein flew overhead, honking plaintively. They were standing on a turf bank above the Severn. Below them a bristling mat of sea rush ran out to shining grey mud flats. They stretched to a central channel of water which was beginning to widen as the tide came up the estuary. On the other side of the river, half a

mile away, more rain clouds were gathering over the Forest of Dean. On their right the bank rose to form a low cliff, where the river started to narrow to half its original width.

'Sailing ships used to go aground here in the past. The only excitement nowadays is when there's a tidal bore. The wave rips across the flats, and you can surf on it further up where the river narrows.'

A pair of oyster-catchers flew up from the foreshore, wheeling gracefully across the water.

'That's one of the best things about this place,' said Munro. 'Normally nothing happens. No one comes here except for a few fishermen and bird-watchers.'

'What about LeValet?' said Saskia. 'I saw his farm down the road. That can't be easy to ignore.'

'He let toxic waste run into the Severn last year, and was successfully prosecuted for once. Since then he's kept a low profile round here. The original farmhouse was a nice rambling old place, but he's turned it into a kind of Gloucestershire South Fork. He doesn't use it much, though. A bailiff runs things for him.'

'On my way here I saw a lorry crammed with chickens from his farm. It was like some animal slave ship.'

'It's the same in his old people's homes, I gather,' said Munro. 'They're packed in like battery hens.'

She shivered again. He gave her a sharp look.

'There's another storm on the way,' he said. 'We'd better make a move.'

They crossed the stream by a small footbridge. Saskia stopped for a moment for one last look at the view. The air had the clearness of approaching rain and in the far distance she could see the motorway bridge, stretching like three faint pencil arcs across the estuary.

'Why were you so scared that day I met you on the Clifton bridge?' he suddenly asked.

She began to walk along the other bank of the stream towards the farm, trying to adjust to the unexpected question, and wondering whether she could possibly tell him the truth. He'd seemed to understand about her father. Perhaps he might even understand this.

'I'm afraid of heights,' she said, her voice sticking in her throat as it always did when she talked of it. 'After the crash when my father died, and I was trapped with this huge drop below me, that's when the fear started. Stupid, isn't it, still to be affected after so long?'

'I don't think so. Have you ever seen anyone about it?'

'I was hauled off to the school doctor once, after I had a bad panic attack on an escape ladder at fire practice. He said it'd disappear when I was older.'

'Your thoughts are what you make them, you know,' he said quietly. 'But perhaps it'd help to see someone who knows a bit more about these things.'

She turned to look at him, startled.

'A shrink, you mean? For heaven's sake, it's not as bad as that.'

'It was only a suggestion,' he said mildly. 'Tell me how you started making films. Was that Artemis's doing as well?'

Relieved, Saskia launched into the story of how Artemis had encouraged her to go film school, and then gave him a heavily edited account of her time at Metropolis. She had no wish to let him know that she'd been living with Adrian. They'd discussed enough traumas for one day, and in any case she was sure he wouldn't have approved.

Once back at the car he fixed it in five minutes. The engine kicked into spluttering life immediately when she turned the ignition key. He stood wiping his hands on a rag as she wound down the window to thank him.

'It's nothing,' he said, 'but you really should get it

serviced. And when you drive back, go the other way. The road bears round in a loop. It'll add another mile to your journey, but at least you won't have to put up with LeValet's eyesores.'

He'd pushed his hands in his pockets and hunched up his shoulders once more. Suddenly she wanted to tease him.

'Any more instructions?' she said. 'I assume I'm not to darken your doorstep again.'

For the first time she saw him taken aback. Then he smiled.

'Do you really want to, after what you said about me? But I'll give you my phone number, just in case you get an unexpected urge for country life.'

He dredged up a crumpled professional card from his pocket and wrote on the back with a stub of pencil.

She'd been too anxious not to spoil the new understanding between them to resurrect the subject of the photos, but now she hesitated, wondering if she dared at least mention the cassette again. It was infuriating that he still hadn't seen any of her work. She took the cassette from her pocket.

'I know you've made up your mind about the photos. But it isn't fair to judge me as if Adrian's standards are mine. Won't you just run through my film?'

He raised his eyebrows.

'Still hanging in there, are you? All right, hand it over. I might take a look if I have time. A safe journey now, and good luck with the new film.'

Rain was beginning to fall again, and he didn't wait for her to drive away. Through the rear mirror she watched him go back towards the house, a stoical and lonely figure, almost daring her to feel sorry for him. His uncompromising integrity appealed to her, in spite of herself. Adrian in the same position would have played

on her sympathy. But Munro couldn't have been less like Adrian, and that made Saskia almost certain, as she saw him push the cassette into his pocket, that he wouldn't even bother to run it through.

Chapter 9

Morwenna and Ben brought a carload of photographic equipment and Ben's batterie de cuisine with them to Gilead, but the house enfolded them and their belongings as easily as it did all visitors. After they'd made a brief tour, chosen a bedroom for themselves, and looked at the garden, it was time for lunch. The meal turned inevitably into a planning session, and they all finally came to rest in the drawing room well after three o'clock.

Morwenna still had jet-lag and fell asleep on one of the sofas, her head propped on a cushion. Ben was concocting a list of groceries. Saskia began to rough out the outline of a script.

The previous night she'd been up till the small hours wrestling with a business plan, but her bruised hand kept reminding her annoyingly of Munro and the events of the day. She'd catch herself breaking off every now and then to wonder how he spent the evenings in that lonely, rundown house. When she'd told Morwenna about the outcome of her visit, she'd been irritated but resigned.

'We'll have to manage without his photos, then, but you weren't nearly tough enough,' she said. 'He needs someone to put the boot in. Now he'll just go on wallowing in his memories, I suppose.'

Saskia had not said she'd almost put the boot in herself. Unexpectedly she found herself wanting to defend Munro. The last thing she associated him with was self-pity.

Eventually she glanced at her watch. It was almost five,

and noisy clusters of starlings were beginning to take up their roosts in the cedar tree. In the room there was no sound except the crackling of the fire, and Morwenna's gentle snores, until her head jerked up from the cushion at a long urgent peal on the front door bell.

'Jesus, not the bailiffs already!' she said sleepily.

'More likely a double glazing salesman longing to get his hands on Gilead,' said Ben. 'I'll go, Saskia. You really ought to keep the outer gate locked until you have an entry-phone. The city's not as safe as it was in Artemis's day.'

He disappeared, and Saskia heard a woman's voice. A minute later Ben ushered Freddy into the room. She held Jules perched on her hip, and in the other hand a packed bin liner, which she dumped by the door.

'Well, here we are at last,' she said, smiling round expectantly at them all.

'Who on earth's this?' Morwenna hissed at Saskia. 'Orphan Annie?'

Saskia stared at Freddy in dismay. She'd been waiting for a good moment to tell Morwenna about her, but the moment had never come, and then in the excitement of the day she'd forgotten completely. Somehow she managed to cover up her consternation, and rushed forward to bring her to the fire.

'This is Freddy Carter,' she said determinedly, hoping to brazen it out.

'And Jules. Don't forget him,' said Freddy, smiling fondly at the baby, and sitting on the sofa opposite Morwenna.

'Yes, of course,' floundered Saskia. 'Freddy, I'd like you to meet Morwenna and Ben. They're friends of mine, part of the film-making team. They'll be living here too.'

'Too!' exploded Morwenna, sitting up and throwing the

cushion on the floor. She glowered at Freddy. 'Are you staying at Gilead as well?'

'Yes. Any objections?' said Freddy. Her smile had vanished, and she was bristling like a hedgehog. 'Saskia invited me.'

'With the baby?' said Morwenna incredulously, her voice rising. She turned to Saskia. 'With a *baby*?'

Saskia was beginning to recover her equilibrium.

'Yes,' she said firmly. 'We arranged it two days ago, but there's been so much going on I forgot to tell you. Freddy's going to look after the garden. She's got a diploma in landscape design. It's a terrific stroke of luck I met her. Don't forget we have to start shooting outdoors as soon as possible.'

She frowned at Morwenna, daring her to unleash any further criticism. Ben glanced at both their faces, and then valiantly came and sat down next to Freddy, pulled a bunch of keys from his pocket, and dangled them in front of the baby. Jules made a grab for them.

'What a terrific little kid,' said Ben, beaming at him.

'He's got four teeth,' said Freddy proudly.

'Jesus wept!' groaned Morwenna, clutching her head in her hands.

'Why don't you make some tea, Ben?' said Saskia hurriedly. 'I'll show Freddy the nursery, and we can talk later.'

She could hear her voice sounding falsely bright like a nanny with mutinous children. Morwenna looked up and gave her a baleful look as if she'd been personally betrayed. Saskia grabbed Freddy by the arm and almost frog-marched her and Jules from the room.

They climbed the stairs in silence, Freddy obviously still smouldering at Morwenna's reaction. She stopped at the landing and faced Saskia.

'Look,' she said, 'if you're thinking better of it, I don't

mind. But let's get one thing straight. I'm not staying here if that stuck-up bitch keeps griping about me. I know she's your friend, but I mean it.'

'She won't, I promise you,' said Saskia. 'She's only just come back from the States, and she's jet-lagged. It's my fault for not telling her first. It took her by surprise.'

'Hmm,' said Freddy. 'She didn't sound like the world's greatest child-lover to me.'

They'd reached the nursery suite, and Saskia switched on the light.

'It's not exactly up-to-date,' she said doubtfully. 'I hope you'll like it.'

The floor was covered with a faded Turkish carpet. There were two basket chairs with yellow gingham cushions in front of the fireplace, and a high brass-railed guard. A school table, heavily scored and stained with ink, stood in the middle of the room. The walls were decorated with scenes from *Peter Pan*. The night nursery contained a rocking horse which had lost most of its tail, a pastel blue chest of drawers painted with gambolling lambs, and a large drop-sided cot. Through a communicating door lay another small bedroom, a bathroom, and a tiny kitchenette.

'It's bloody marvellous,' said Freddy, gazing round. Her belligerent expression had melted entirely. 'Jules has never had a cot of his own in his life, let alone a bedroom.'

'There's an electric fire if you don't want to lug wood upstairs, but Ben says he'll try to make the central heating work. And you'll find sheets and blankets in the bathroom cupboard. I'll ask Ben to bring up your bag. Come and have some tea with us when you've settled in.'

'Bloody marvellous,' repeated Freddy, still looking round her in awe. 'I reckon I can put up with a bit of aggro in return for this.'

* * *

In spite of Freddy's words Saskia went downstairs wondering how she was going to keep the peace between her and Morwenna. She knew Morwenna had never particularly liked children, but she hadn't expected such an extreme reaction. Her continuing touchiness with Ben was hard enough to live with, and if she didn't accept Freddy the atmosphere in the house would be unbearable.

Ben wisely disappeared upstairs with the bin-liner immediately. Morwenna was seated on a stool in front of the fire, moodily poking at the logs. There was a glass of whisky by her side. She looked up when Saskia came join her.

'How long have you known her?' she demanded.

'Since January,' said Saskia. 'She was being evicted from that house of LeValet's.'

'And how many times have you actually met her?'

'Twice, but it was long enough. I'm certain she's absolutely straight. She's even been paying back some money I gave her, and that can't have been easy on benefit.'

'Have you gone completely nuts?' asked Morwenna. 'I suppose you see yourself as part of some Mother Teresa scenario, but I know people like her. In the end she'll just screw you for all you've got.'

'She's working for me, and this is my house. We've already agreed that I should take the ultimate responsibility for anything that goes wrong. I'd have to pay a professional gardener a fortune to pull the place into shape in the time we have available.'

'Well, even if I went along with that, and I just might for the sake of the film,' said Morwenna, hurling pine cones like grenades into the heart of the fire, 'there's still the baby. How'll we get anything done with it yelling and puking all over the place? And more to the point, how'll she do the gardening?'

'I haven't seen Jules puke once, and with a bit of luck

you won't hear him yelling much. The nursery's at the other end of the house. And a friend of hers is going to look after Jules while she works. Come on, Morwenna. It could just as easily be you or me in a fix like that.'

'I damn well wouldn't forget to take precautions, especially these days.'

'Oh, yes? You aren't Miss Frigidaire by any means. What about the one-night stand you had with that guy from ATV when we were at film school? I seem to remember you rushed off pretty quickly to get the morning-after pill. How come you forgot then?'

Morwenna gave a reluctant smile. 'But that was ages ago. And he was totally gorgeous, though far too macho. I never can go along with that kind of Tom Cruise character for very long. He got me some really good commissions as well, when I started work.'

'You weren't much older than Freddy then, and she thought Jules's father was totally gorgeous too,' said Saskia. 'What's the matter with you? We're all wrong these days. I wonder if you realise what a tough time you're giving Ben. Nothing's going to work if you carry on like this.'

Morwenna stopped throwing the cones, and slowly looked at Saskia. Her eyes glittered in the firelight.

'OK,' she said eventually. 'If it's really bugging you that much I'll try to get along with Freddy, but as for Ben, that's my business.'

'Don't hurt him,' said Saskia. 'He hasn't hurt you.'

'Maybe that's the problem,' said Morwenna. 'I've never lived with anyone so bloody nice before. I thought it'd be great to be with a man who didn't hassle me, but now I'm not sure. I know I'm a pig to him sometimes, but all that upper-class consideration gets on your nerves after a while.'

'Just go easy on him, that's all,' said Saskia.

Morwenna smiled at her.

'Stop being an agony aunt. How's the outline going?'

Saskia knew it was the nearest she'd get to an apology from Morwenna, who was as touchy as a Spanish hidalgo when it came to admitting she was wrong. Suppressing a sigh of relief, she picked up the draft script, and then sighed outright as the doorbell rang again.

'I'll get it,' they heard Ben yell.

'He should retrain as a butler,' Morwenna said with a mischievous glance at Saskia. 'OK, OK, don't look at me like that. I won't say another word.'

A moment later they heard an arch voice calling 'Cooee' in the hall.

'Is that who I think it is?' said Morwenna, watching Saskia's face assume the look of guarded wariness it always wore in her mother's presence. 'I thought you said Laura went back to London.'

'That was only to collect her air freight. She rang me last night and said she was moving into a rented flat in Leigh Woods this morning.'

'Just what we need,' said Morwenna. She'd already had several run-ins with Saskia's mother, who had made it very clear that she thought Morwenna an unsuitable friend for her daughter.

Ben pushed open the door and ushered Laura into the room. She was wearing what looked suspiciously like a mink coat. Morwenna could see Ben gazing at it in horror.

'Darling,' she said to Saskia, who'd got to her feet with a resigned look, and gone to greet her. 'I had to see how you were getting on, and besides, I needed a little break after all that moving.'

Morwenna hated her for the effect she had on Saskia. In her effort to distance herself from Laura she assumed a coldness that was totally unlike her. But even that was

better than Saskia's occasional painful attempts when Morwenna first knew her, now mercifully abandoned, to win just a little of Laura's self-absorbed attention.

Laura took off her coat and handed it to Ben, who dropped it on to a chair as if it were still alive. She was wearing a tobacco-coloured silk suit with the skirt slit to the knee, and an assortment of gold chains round her neck. As she sat down her eye lighted on Morwenna.

'Oh, it's you,' she said unenthusiastically. 'It must be at least two years since we met. How are you, Morwenna?'

'Very well, thanks,' she said abruptly, thinking that two years weren't nearly long enough.

She was deeply suspicious of Mrs Smythe's new-found desire, relayed to her by Saskia, to be friends with her daughter at last. Nor could she imagine her managing to start a business alone without some man to help her. But the worst thing was the way she could never let Saskia be herself. Morwenna couldn't make out if she saw her daughter as some sort of threat, or was simply too selfish to let anyone else have centre stage.

'Morwenna's working on the film with me,' said Saskia. 'And this is Ben Murray. He's doing the catering for us. They've moved in with me, temporarily.'

'How interesting,' said Laura, giving a suspicious look at his earring and pony-tail. Ben glowered back at her as if she'd personally slaughtered every single one of the minks. 'Which cookery school were you at, Mr Murray? Prue Leith or Tante Marie?'

'Ben was at Westminster Catering College,' said Morwenna. 'We're living together,' she added mischievously.

'I see,' said Laura, who obviously didn't. 'You mean Ben's a sort of housekeeper?'

Morwenna winked at Saskia, relieved that she was beginning to look less tense.

'He's a wonderful cook,' said Morwenna. 'His soufflés are out of this world.' Better soothe Ben's wounded feelings as well, she thought. Saskia was right. She had been coming on rather strong with him lately, but he kept taking it the wrong way, when all she wanted was to make him a little more assertive.

Ben cheered up slightly. 'I'll make some tea,' he said. 'The scones are ready, and there's a chocolate cake too.'

'He seems very sweet,' said Laura doubtfully when he'd disappeared from the room. She'd begun to look a little more sure of herself as she took in Ben's public school accent. 'But is he – is he slightly *gay*?'

Saskia lost her composure again.

'For heaven's sake, Laura! Of course he isn't. But what on earth would it matter if he were?'

'There's nothing like that about Ben,' said Morwenna, deciding to go in for the kill. 'He's the best lay I ever had.'

Laura went bright pink. 'It's just that I'm concerned about you both,' she said. 'There are such odd people about these days. I do wish, Saskia, that you'd reconsider Adrian's offer. I felt you were safe when you were with him.'

'About as safe as working with a crocodile! How many times do I have to tell you?'

'I must admit he's been rather offhand with me lately,' said Laura. 'But have you thought properly about the responsibility of setting up on your own? Do you really think you can cope?'

'Of course she can,' said Morwenna. 'Perhaps you don't realise, Mrs Smythe, that Saskia's one of the best documentary makers around.'

Laura looked uncomfortable.

'I'm sure she's very good at her work. It's Gerald who worries me.'

'Why ever should he?' demanded Saskia impatiently. 'He can't do anything.'

Laura tugged at the chains round her neck.

'He telephoned me this afternoon,' she said. 'He asked me to keep our conversation confidential, but maybe if I tell you about it you'll believe at last that I'm on your side, Saskia darling. I meant it when I said I want us to make a fresh start.'

Saskia saw Morwenna's disbelieving look. She felt equally astounded that Laura was actually offering to back up her words with something positive.

'Well, what did he say?' she demanded.

'I'd much rather speak to you alone,' said Laura, looking nervously at Morwenna.

'If you're really going to be on my side, you'll have to trust my friends,' said Saskia, trying to be patient.

'Well,' said Laura doubtfully, 'it started when I rang Adrian earlier today to give him my new address. He'd seen a cutting from Gerald's newspaper saying he still hoped to buy Gilead some day and use it for the whole community.'

'But we know all about that,' said Saskia. 'He can hope as much as he likes.'

'Let me finish. Adrian hadn't realised Gerald was interested in Gilead. He got very excited and said he was going to ask Gerald for additional funding in exchange for promoting Gerald's cause in his film.'

'Typical Adrian,' said Saskia. 'Don't you realise now what a double-dealer he is? It won't affect me though. He'll probably use the extra money for location filming in Africa, but I've got Artemis's original footage of her work there.'

'That's not all. I'm sure Adrian got through to Gerald immediately afterwards, because Gerald rang me just half an hour later. By then he knew all about your

plans to set up your own company and make a rival film.'

'You could have told him already,' said Morwenna.

'I hadn't,' said Laura indignantly. 'Really, Saskia, I hadn't. I'd not spoken to Gerald since we met in the cathedral. Adrian must have told him.'

'So what? LeValet can't stop me,' said Saskia with considerably more confidence than she felt. He had acted with alarming speed.

'I'm not so sure. He said that even though you were my daughter he'd decided he couldn't let that stand in his way after all. Then he said if I had your best interests at heart I'd do everything in my power to persuade you to sell.'

She was ominously shiny-eyed, and twisting her necklaces so tightly that one of them suddenly snapped and slithered like a gold snake into her lap.

'He said he could ruin your company's chance of success. He'd discovered somehow that you'd taken out a mortgage on Gilead to finance your film, so he knows now that if the film fails you'll have to sell the house anyway. It scares me, Saskia. You don't know what it's like to be on the wrong side of Gerald, and it's not as if you've a man to look after you.'

Laura rarely did more than sniff and let her eyes get slightly shiny when she was upset, but now genuine tears were running down her cheeks. For the first time in many years, Saskia felt sorry for her. Sitting there with her face blotched and wretched, she looked at least ten years older.

'You don't have to worry. I really can look after myself, and I'm not on my own,' she said more gently. 'What I don't understand is why you stay friends with someone like LeValet.'

'He helped me a lot when your father died,' stumbled Laura. 'He lent me money to tide me over a bad

patch. I wouldn't want to offend him if I can possibly avoid it.'

'You took money from LeValet? How could you?' said Saskia incredulously.

'I don't expect you to understand. You've always been so idealistic. But I was on the rocks. I had no one to lean on.'

'You had yourself,' said Morwenna.

'I'm not like you modern young girls,' said Laura with a reproachful look. 'I wasn't brought up that way. It was a dreadful time for me.'

To Saskia's relief Ben pushed a tea trolley into the room. She knew Morwenna had been on the point of delivering some crushing observation which would have reduced Laura to tears again. She revived slightly when she saw the chocolate cake, produced her compact from her bag, and started to powder her nose with anxious little dabs.

'That cake looks quite delicious,' she said, clearly trying to make an effort. 'How clever you are, Ben. I hope you're going to ask me to try a piece.'

He gave a forced smile, and started to pour out the tea. Freddy, who'd entered the room with Jules in the wake of the trolley, slid quietly on to the sofa next to Saskia. Laura shut her compact with a snap and looked up. Her eyes fell on Freddy.

'Who's this?' she said faintly.

'Another friend of mine. Her name's Freddy Carter. And this is her baby, Jules. She's going to look after the garden. Freddy, meet my mother, Laura Smythe.'

'Hi,' said Freddy, looking at Laura with interest. 'I didn't know your mum lived in Bristol, Saskia.'

'She's decided to open a boutique in Clifton,' said Saskia.

'Very classy!' said Freddy. 'But you'd better watch out

for yourself, Laura. There are some right villains in the rag trade these days.'

'Really?' said Laura faintly. She was watching in horrified fascination as Freddy unhitched the bib of her dungarees, unbuttoned her shirt, and began to feed Jules. 'How old is your baby, Mrs Carter?'

'Miss,' said Freddy cheerfully, 'but don't let it worry you. He's fourteen months now.'

Laura gave a little shudder as she stared at Freddy's distended breast. Luckily Freddy didn't see. Morwenna did, and spurred on by her dislike of Laura, which was even greater than her dislike of babies, decided to champion Freddy.

'What's wrong, Mrs Smythe?' she said. 'It's what they're for, you know.'

Freddy looked up, and instantly understood what was going on. Her face split into a broad smile of complicity.

'Got it right first time, Morwenna,' she said. 'Thanks.'

Morwenna gave a reluctant smile back, and Saskia saw with amused relief that she really was going to try to accept Freddy.

Laura was looking even more outraged, but she pulled herself together as Ben handed her a cup of tea, and launched into a long enquiry as to where he did his shopping in Clifton. Freddy, who was obviously going to be even more of an asset than Saskia had anticipated, broke in with a spirited account of a squatter friend who lived on scraps of food gathered from a rubbish bin outside a take-away.

Laura became quieter and quieter as Morwenna added a description of the down-and-outs in New York. As soon as she'd drunk her tea she gathered up her coat, and announced that she really must be going. Saskia went into the hall with her. Laura slipped into the coat as Saskia held it out, then surprised her even more

by putting her arms round her and giving her a long hug.

'I'm glad you've got your friends here, darling, even though they are a little unusual. I shan't be quite so worried about you now. I hope you won't be too busy to come and see me often. I do want things to get better between us, and it's lonely in that flat all by myself. I even miss Ralphie a tiny bit, but of course I shall be fine once I get the boutique going.'

This was all said with a pathetic look, but the rare embrace had moved Saskia in spite of herself. Unusually Laura wasn't wearing Mitsouko today, but the patchouli perfume she'd used before Saskia's father had died. The scent reminded Saskia how close she'd been to Laura then, and how, now Artemis was gone, she was the only near relative she had left apart from her aunt in Northumberland. As she watched her go through the outer gate she decided that however maddening and unreliable her mother was, she had to make one more effort to restore some of that closeness.

When Saskia went back to the drawing room Morwenna had already broken out the whisky.

'Well, are we really going to believe this great change of heart in your dear mamà?' she demanded.

'Poor old thing,' said Freddy. 'She'd look a lot younger if she didn't do herself up so much. I never thought your mum would be like that, Saskia.'

'How could she wear the skins of dead animals?' said Ben. 'But perhaps she's just too old to know any better. I'll give her some of my leaflets next time.'

Saskia sat down, and took the glass Morwenna gave her.

'I'm beginning to think she really does mean it,' she said, 'but I'd almost rather not have known about LeValet's latest move.'

'He's just trying to put the frighteners on you, but it's obviously going to be a fight to the death over the film if he really does start funding Adrian.' Morwenna sounded as if she relished the prospect.

'LeValet?' said Freddy. 'Don't say you've tangled with him again. What's happened?'

'I'll tell you about it now, and we can discuss the garden as well. We can't afford to lose any time.' Saskia turned to Morwenna. 'We'd better look at Artemis's archive films straight after breakfast tomorrow.'

The morning sun shone directly into Artemis's study, illuminating the shelves of books that lined the walls. Behind a heavy mahogany desk her Arab chair stood as if waiting for her still. The deeply embrasured window looked out over what had always been known as the white garden. The flower beds were filled with ivory narcissi, and Freddy, on top of a stepladder, was rapidly restoring the sheltering yew hedge to its original green geometry. She wielded an electric trimmer with casual aplomb.

'Looks like another chain saw massacre,' said Morwenna. 'And last time I saw Ben he was stuck half inside the Esse, trying to unblock the flue. You'd better get the staff insured before it's too late.'

'Stop needling. It's all in hand,' said Saskia, unlocking a door which led down shallow stone steps to a large semi-basement. 'Don't you want to see the dark room?'

Bottles of chemicals were ranged above sturdy work benches. Developing trays stood next to two deep sinks, and there was an old-fashioned enlarger and dryer. The smell of fixing fluid lingered in the air, and at the end of the room, above a finishing area, a few dusty negatives were pegged to a string.

'Yet another time warp, I see,' said Morwenna, looking round with a critical eye. 'But it'll be fine with

a bit of reorganisation. I'll bring in my equipment as well.'

'I spent ages down here when I was younger. This is Artemis's original movie camera. It's a Bolex HI6,' said Saskia, dragging a leather case from a cupboard, and opening it.

She hoisted the camera to eye level and looked through the view finder. Instantly she was back at the time in her teens when Artemis let her borrow it for her own first film-making attempts, hopelessly romantic reconstructions of famous episodes in history. She remembered Artemis in a hired farthingale as Mary Queen of Scots, taking surreptitious drags at her cigarette while Saskia worked out her shots, and wondered how she'd managed to put up with her so patiently.

'Where did she keep her archive film?' Morwenna asked.

Saskia put the Bolex lovingly back in its case and dragged a large cardboard box from a store cupboard. She began to take out circular metal cases containing hundred-foot reels of film.

'Negatives as well as prints!' Morwenna said gleefully as she inspected the labels. 'I wonder what sort of state they're in? You know how this old acetate-based stuff deteriorates, but it's so cold in here it may be all right. I'll take the reels to one of the local production houses, and look through them on a neg cutter.'

'This is odd,' said Saskia, only half listening to her, and frowning at a reel she'd found tucked away in a corner of the box. 'I thought Artemis only made movie films for a few years before the war. She always told me she went back to stills photography after that, but there's footage here marked New Mexico.'

'It's probably some ethnographic stuff on the Pueblo Indians. She met Sandstrom there, didn't she? Maybe

she got so involved with him that she forgot about filming.'

'Let's have a look, anyway. There's a projector in the study. I'll bring up a reel of the African footage as well. It'll give you a quick idea of the quality of the prints, and we can run through the rest afterwards.'

They went back into the study. Saskia set up a portable screen, and uncovered the projector which had always stood ready in one corner for Artemis to show her work to visiting academics. She began to thread in the African footage, while Morwenna went to draw the heavy blue silk curtains. Saskia switched off the lamp, and pictures began to flash on the screen.

The film, for all its age and imperfections, was stunning. Saskia had seen it many times before, but she'd forgotten just how good it was. She hardly noticed the streaks of light and the dirt marks, she was so absorbed.

Artemis had chosen to film an initiation ceremony. Two lines of African girls faced each other on a dusty plain, stamping and swaying in unison. They were naked except for brief leather aprons and the shining metal bands that sheathed their arms and lower legs. Between the lines was a solid phalanx of bulls, herded together head to tail, so that their backs made a shifting platform between their long curving horns.

'Bull-leaping,' said Morwenna, watching intently. 'Just like the ancient Cretans. Beautiful light and wonderful angles, but I suppose we're going to have the usual exhibition of male heroics.'

'You're forgetting that women were bull-leapers as well as men in Crete,' said Saskia quietly. 'And only women did it in this African tribe.'

Even without sound the scene was electrifying. A girl stepped forward from the line, her head thrown back, eyes wide, body gleaming with oil. She broke into a run,

sprinted towards the first bull, leaped on its back, and danced lightly along the unsteady platform. She missed the shifting horns by a hair's breadth, and landed triumphantly in the sand on the other side just as the reel of film whirred to an end.

'Fantastic!' said Morwenna. 'I've never seen anything like it.'

'I thought I'd use a clip in our opening sequence. It sums up Artemis's character completely. And there's a separate sound tape too, which makes it even more exciting.'

'If we can get a really good print off the negative it'll be perfect,' said Morwenna. She launched into a long recital of technicalities while Saskia rewound the spool and threaded in the New Mexico film. She was about to start the projector again when Ben put his head apologetically round the door.

'Phone call for you, Morwenna, from the States. It's some query about that last lot of work you did.'

'Damn, I'll have to go,' she said. 'We really ought to get a cell-phone, you know. Why don't you give the New Mexico reel a run-through while you're waiting?'

As the door closed behind her Saskia set the film in motion. This time the images on the screen arrested her attention even more forcibly than the bull-leaping.

There were only two sequences. The first opened with a shot of Carl Sandstrom on location, blond hair bleached nearly white by the desert sun, talking to Artemis outside the doorway of a pueblo house. He was holding both her hands and smiling so intimately at her that it seemed as if they were the only two people there. They were totally absorbed in each other, and obviously unaware of being filmed. Saskia almost winced at their vulnerability to the camera's eye.

In the second sequence Sandstrom and Artemis were sitting against the wall of the house, and she was leaning

back in his arms. The forty-year-old Artemis, with her dark, glossy hair tied up in a ribbon, was still strikingly attractive. As she turned her head to laugh up at him he slowly pulled the ribbon away. Her hair slid round her shoulders, and just for a moment her expression changed to one of defenceless longing. Then he bent his head and kissed her.

That was all, but it left Saskia breathless. It was startling enough to see the strong, self-sufficient Artemis cast aside her defences, but she was even more surprised by her feeling of envy at their closeness. There had never been anything like that in her own relationships with men, and after the affair with Adrian she'd given up expecting it. She puzzled yet again over how Artemis had been able to jettison such an intense relationship.

As she thought about the sequences she'd just seen she began to realise just how striking they'd be in her own film. Then the thought was swiftly followed by the uncomfortable feeling that she had no right to expose such a private scene to the public gaze.

Up to now, she'd always regarded the affair partisanly, from Artemis's point of view. But seeing Carl's uninhibited adoration, she wondered for the first time just how much he too had been hurt by their parting. Though the temptation was enormous she began to think it would be even more wrong to show the New Mexico footage without giving his version of the break.

Artemis had only once spoken to her in any detail about the end of the affair. They'd been sitting in this room again, during Saskia's first summer vacation, shortly before Artemis returned to Africa. They were together on the window seat, looking out over the garden, pale with fragile tobacco flowers and hydrangeas like banks of bleached coral. Saskia had still been adjusting to the end

of her affair with Julian, and as usual hadn't been able to resist confiding in Artemis.

'You're well out of it,' said Artemis firmly when she'd heard the whole story. 'You'll have no doubts when things are right. I knew with Carl.'

It was usually easy to ignore Artemis's age, but the morning sun on her face and the unexpected wistfulness of her expression made it suddenly very clear. Artemis was going away, and old people forgot things. Saskia might not have the chance to ask her about Carl again.

'Won't you tell me about him?' she said. 'You always said you would one day.'

Artemis poured herself some lemonade from the jug Mrs Adams had just brought in. Saskia held her breath.

'Yes,' Artemis said meditatively at last, 'I think perhaps the time has come to talk to you about Carl.'

She took a sip from the glass, and the ice floating on top caught the sunlight and reflected a broken pattern on her face.

'When I was doing my PhD at Cambridge, I fell in love with one of the young lecturers in my department. We planned to marry once I'd got my doctorate, and then work abroad together. But my thesis attracted a lot of favourable attention when it was published. I suspect he couldn't take the competition, because he suddenly insisted that I gave up work when we married. I was still in love with him, but I decided to break off my engagement and go to Africa alone.'

Artemis turned her glass, staring unseeingly at the pale crescents of fruit floating there.

'For some years I persuaded myself that I could manage perfectly well without any permanent relationship with a man,' she continued. 'Then I met Carl. He was on location near the pueblo village where I was working. He was a few years younger than me, and I was suspicious of his

reputation as a film idol, but in fact he was intelligent and unassuming. His good looks were actually a burden to him, because women expected him to behave like a god. I invited him to visit my village and then, quite unexpectedly, we were in love.'

Artemis turned the silver bracelets on her wrist.

'He gave me these then,' she said. 'I know it's illogical, but I've never stopped wearing them.'

'So what happened next?' prompted Saskia, hardly daring to speak in case she broke the chain of reminiscence. Artemis smiled and sighed.

'We lived together at his house in Beverly Hills while I did my writing up and he finished the film. He was becoming tired of Hollywood life, and I wanted him to buy a farm in Kenya as soon as the war ended, where we could live together undisturbed, and I could carry on my original work. But Yvette had developed schizophrenia shortly after their marriage and was permanently in a sanatorium. She idolised him still and lived for his visits. He felt if he went away it might tip her into suicide.'

Artemis pushed the window wide open, as if she was suddenly suffocating, and took a deep breath of the summery air.

'We had a violent row about our future. He implored me to stay with him, but by this time I was desperate to resume my African work. Other researchers were showing signs of homing in on it, and I only needed another few years to produce some unique results. The press was beginning to hound us too, and decided to cast Yvette as a saint and me as the scarlet woman. I felt I was losing all my self-respect, so I left him. It was such a strange, angry parting after everything that had gone before.'

'Didn't you ever see him again?' said Saskia, awestruck.

'No, though he tried to get in touch with me several times. I decided the break had to be irrevocable. But

sometimes, even at my age, I ache for him, literally ache, and then I do wonder— '

'Wonder what?' said Saskia, and then realised too late that she'd prompted once too often. Artemis's face suddenly became guarded, before resuming its usual detached expression.

'Wonder if I'm an old fool,' she said gaily, 'sitting here spoiling a beautiful day maundering over the past. The present's all that matters. So no more regrets about Julian. As you get on with life, you'll suddenly find he doesn't matter any more.'

Artemis had been right about Julian, thought Saskia, sitting now in the half light cast by the beam of the projector which she'd forgotten to turn off. But after seeing today's film she strongly suspected that Carl Sandstrom must always have continued to matter to Artemis.

She heard Morwenna's footsteps coming down the corridor towards the study, and began to rewind the film. A moment later Morwenna burst into the room.

'What a waste of time,' she said. 'If they'd read my notes properly they'd have found everything they needed. How did you get on with the New Mexico film? Anything interesting?'

'See for yourself,' said Saskia, starting the reel again.

Morwenna watched it in engrossed silence. Her expression was exultant when Saskia drew back the curtains.

'It's dynamite! They'll go ape over it in the States.'

'I know,' said Saskia, trying unsuccessfully to damp down her own excitement, 'and imagine Adrian's face when he sees it. But I wish I could put Sandstrom's side of the story too. No one's ever heard his version.'

'You might as well give up on that one straight away,' said Morwenna. 'I met a news reporter in the States who'd tried to interview him recently at his ranch. She had one of the top paparazzi with her, and he knew all the dodges,

but they got nowhere. There was a security guard behind every cactus.'

'Well, I'm going to have to try to get something from him,' said Saskia. 'You'll be mad with me, but I don't feel I can show this footage unless I've told him about it first.'

'For Christ's sake, here we go again,' groaned Morwenna. 'I knew something like this would happen. Anyone else would go ahead and worry afterwards. Just how are you going to tell him, if he's such a recluse?'

'Didn't you say ages ago that he's coming to the opening of his retrospective in London this spring?'

'Yes, in a week or two, I think, but that won't do you any good. He'll simply turn up for the opening film, turn on the charm for the photographers, and say absolutely nothing to anyone vaguely resembling a reporter. And if you tell him you're related to Artemis he'll run a mile. You'll never get an interview.'

'I won't show the footage without his permission. I must see him,' said Saskia.

Chapter 10

The mortgage went through surprisingly quickly. Saskia found it difficult to believe that she was the head of a promising new film company. It was hard to have Gilead even partly in someone else's hands, but at least she'd finished the script now, and written the copy for the promotion brochure.

On it depended their chances of selling the project to Channel Five, their first target. Saskia knew it still had slots to fill at the end of the year. She knew also that it demanded fearsomely high standards for bought-in material. If she could persuade an American television company to contribute funding as well, perhaps she'd be less inclined to wake up in the small hours agonising over the mortgage.

The finished brochure looked irresistible. Pictures from Artemis's private collection were interleaved with stills from her movie films and photos of Gilead taken by Morwenna. The crowning glory was a centre spread of Artemis and Sandstrom together from the New Mexico footage, though Saskia continued to feel uneasy about using the material even in this limited way. She'd managed to contact Sandstrom's agent in the States, but he'd been as helpful as a brick wall. Her only hope now was to try to speak to him herself, and she arranged her marketing trip to London to coincide with the opening night of his retrospective.

* * *

When Saskia reached the National Film Theatre, dusk was beginning to veil its harsh concrete façade. The nearby Festival Hall, lights blazing across the Thames, shone like a berthed liner. A queue of fans tailed away along the South Bank, waiting for the rare chance to see Carl Sandstrom in person.

Through a mixture of bare-faced effrontery and the judicious display of Morwenna's Nikon and press card, Saskia managed to inveigle her way into the ranks of the press. They were kept firmly together inside the crowded cinema, like a bunch of dangerous animals, in a roped-off enclosure to the right of the rostrum below the screen. A reporter with one of the television news crews told her that even though Carl Sandstrom never gave interviews most of the press had decided it was worth turning up anyway, just in case a miracle happened.

'He's been attending a reception before the film, strictly private of course. Probably the best we can hope for is a smile from the old boy, if it's one of his good days,' he said pessimistically.

The film that evening was *The Eye of the Storm*, which was being made in New Mexico when Artemis first met Carl Sandstrom. It was now almost as famous as *Gone with the Wind*. According to the press hand-out he'd give them a brief photo session before the performance, he'd speak for twenty minutes only about his films, and there would be absolutely no questions afterwards.

'And that'll probably be it,' said the reporter. 'I expect he'll do a disappearing act once the film's in progress. But as it's an early evening do most of the press lads won't stay anyway. They're nipping off to cover a charity show with Liz Taylor at the Palladium.'

Their conversation was ended abruptly by an explosion of flash bulbs as Carl Sandstrom and his entourage proceeded slowly down the aisle towards the screen. It was

like a royal progress, heads turning as he passed by, and an audible sigh from the female members of the audience at seeing a myth made flesh.

He was taller than Saskia had expected, with a lean, upright body and thick silver hair. He looked like some ancient hero from a Norse saga, and even at eighty still exuded glamour. A middle-aged woman, perfectly groomed, stalked immediately behind him, swinging a Gucci shoulder bag large enough to stun several fans at one go, and scanning the audience as if it consisted entirely of potential terrorists.

'Martha Bean, Sandstrom's PA,' whispered the reporter.

They were followed by an entourage from the British film establishment, who ranged themselves along the front row. Carl Sandstrom stepped on to the rostrum, still closely followed by Martha Bean, who was extracting a tape recorder from her bag.

He listened impassively as he was introduced by the organiser. When he spoke his voice was miraculously unaltered from his great movie days, strong and deep, spiced faintly by his native Swedish accent. Saskia thought unexpectedly that he reminded her of Munro. They both had the same self-contained air of authority.

Sandstrom spoke briefly on *The Eye of the Storm* and his part in its making. It was a witty and thoughtful talk, and it finished in exactly twenty minutes. He gave the audience an old-fashioned bow, making it perfectly clear that his role for the evening was finished. But as the applause came to an end one of the reporters shouted out: 'What about Artemis Venner? Tell us about you and Artemis. Didn't you meet her in New Mexico?'

Sandstrom's face went completely blank. He turned and walked off the rostrum on the opposite side to the press. Martha Bean rushed forward and said to the reporter in a

voice like a buzz-saw: 'No questions. Those are the rules. The party's over, my friends.'

The reporter subsided with a resigned look as the photographers began to pack up. Saskia knew they were anxious to fortify themselves in the bar before going on to the Palladium. The house lights dimmed, and she saw Sandstrom take up a seat at the far end of the front row. She became even more certain that he intended to escape through a fire exit on his left when the film was underway.

As soon as the Twentieth Century Fox searchlights blazed on to the screen, and everyone's attention was diverted, she crept round the back of the auditorium, down the other side, and pushed quietly through the fire door. A long passage led to an exit. She opened the door to the pavement a crack, and saw a black stretch limousine waiting, with a chauffeur absorbed in the evening paper.

Saskia flattened herself against the wall by the inner door, so that she'd be hidden initially when Sandstrom came through. The passage was cold and stuffy, and she felt sick with apprehension. She hadn't the slightest idea what she was going to say to him. It would be rather like trying to talk to one of the statues on Mount Rushmore. The fire door flew open, almost crushing her in the process. She heard Sandstrom's voice.

'Not too bad this time, Martha, but let's make that the last retrospective.'

The fire door swung shut, and she saw them walking ahead of her down the passage. For a moment she was paralysed, and then she rushed forward and caught him by the arm.

'Please, Mr Sandstrom, may I speak to you for a moment? It's very urgent.'

He stopped, turned, saw her, and swayed slightly. His hand flew to his chest. He was staring at her as though she

was an apparition. For a moment she wondered guiltily if he was about to have a heart attack, he looked so shaken.

Martha Bean had already pounced and was trying to pull her away. Her grip felt as if she pumped iron daily.

'Get out,' she rasped. 'Get out, right now, or I'll call the police. I'll have you charged with assault.'

To Saskia's relief Sandstrom was looking slightly less shaken, though he was still staring at her. He didn't move.

'I only wanted to talk to you for a moment about Artemis,' she said frantically. 'She was my great-aunt.'

Martha Bean went completely overboard at Artemis's name.

'Out!' she screeched, wrenching Saskia's arm round into a half nelson.

Saskia wondered dazedly if she had a black belt as well. With her free hand she pulled from her pocket the signed photo from Artemis's desk. She pushed it at him as Martha Bean started to drag her towards the outer door.

'She told me so much about you,' she called desperately to him. 'And I loved her so much too.'

The words sounded naive and melodramatic as soon as she'd said them, but to her amazement they worked.

A look of comprehension was beginning to dawn on Sandstrom's face. He looked at the photo in his hand, and then at her.

'Let her go, Martha!' he said. His voice was quiet, but Martha Bean dropped Saskia's arm immediately, gazing at him like a frustrated sheepdog.

'But can't you see, Carl? She's just another weirdo.'

'Just for once I don't think so.' He turned back to Saskia. 'What's your name?'

'Saskia, Saskia Tyrrell. My father was Matthew Tyrrell, her sister Phoebe's son.'

'I never knew her sister had a son,' he said slowly. 'But I do remember her talking about Phoebe. Right, Miss Tyrrell, I think perhaps we need to talk after all.'

He held open the outer door and ushered her on to the pavement. Martha Bean's stiletto heels rapped after them like castanets.

'Get yourself a taxi, Martha,' he said. 'I want to talk to Miss Tyrrell alone.'

'But she could be a con artist, a mugger, anything! I'm warning you, Carl, they're here in London too. And what about those people you were going to meet for drinks at the Hilton?'

'Tell them another time. This can't wait.'

The chauffeur held open the door of the limousine for Saskia. She climbed in and sat down on the grey suede seat. The interior was like a small room, complete with a television set and cocktail cabinet. Sandstrom pressed a button, and a Haydn quartet filled the air. The car rolled away, leaving Martha Bean stranded on the kerb waving impotently at passing taxis.

As they drove across Waterloo Bridge Saskia saw to her left the Thames gleaming darkly, stretching away towards Westminster. The plane trees lining the embankment were outlined against the floodlit façade of the Savoy hotel. Sandstrom saw her looking at it.

'I'm staying there, and it's one of the few places where we can have an undisturbed conversation,' he said. 'Is that all right by you?'

Five minutes later Saskia was walking with him through the revolving door of the Savoy. She managed to jettison her trench coat, worn to help her merge inconspicuously with the press, in the ladies' cloakroom, but the dress underneath was three years old. She brushed out her hair around her face, wound her rope of jet

beads into a choker round her neck, and sprayed herself with the perfume provided by a sympathetic attendant.

Sandstrom was waiting for her in a secluded part of the Thames foyer. She walked towards him across carpets thick as well-kept turf, trying not to stare at the iridescent mirrors and trompe l'oeil paintings which lined the walls. At a white piano on a canopied dais someone was aptly playing forties tunes. She sat down next to Sandstrom on a green velvet sofa.

'Well,' he said, giving her back the photo, 'it's lucky for you that my arteries are in good shape. You gave me quite a shock there. You've a great look of Artemis. When were you born?'

'In 1966. She was abroad then. I didn't get to know her until I was older.'

'She never answered any of my letters after we parted. She told me she was going to her home first, but she was determined to return to Africa.'

A waiter came unobtrusively to their side.

'How about a drink while we talk?' Sandstrom said. 'I don't suppose young English women drink sherry these days. What would you have with your friends?'

'At college we drank slammers,' she said, smiling at him. He was beginning to seem less awe-inspiring, and she decided she might as well relax and enjoy herself while she could.

'Good God, what's that?'

'Tequila and lemonade, made to fizz, and drunk very fast. But whisky and water would be fine.'

'Slammers of any sort are definitely out of my league,' he said. 'We'll both have whisky, Bushmills I think.'

The waiter departed with their order. Sandstrom smiled at her.

'You look even more like Artemis now, with your hair

that way. It's not so much an actual resemblance, but the expression, a certain trick of holding your head. Tell me why you were called Saskia. Wasn't it the name of Rembrandt's wife?'

'My father was a painter. He chose the name. Rembrandt was his favourite artist.'

'Artemis's too,' said Sandstrom. 'We were going to do a grand tour of all the European art galleries after the war. We had so many plans. But I don't want to go over the past – Artemis hated that. Tell me where you live.'

'At Gilead, her house in Bristol. She left it to me in her will.'

'She talked a lot about her home, but it's another place I never got to see. What do you do there?'

'I make documentaries for television. I was a producer with Metropolis, one of the London companies, till recently, but I've just set up on my own with a friend.'

'And how did you get into television? It's not so easy these days, I'm told.'

'That was all due to Artemis as well.'

While they had their drinks she told him about her early career. He was a good listener, and seemed especially amused by her accounts of life at film school with Morwenna.

'I had fun too, in the early Hollywood years. There was a crowd of us young actors, all longing to break out of bit parts. We didn't have a bean, but we enjoyed life. Then, when I made it, things changed. Being a star brings its own problems. You feel you're losing touch with reality. I met Artemis just in time. But there I go, back in the past again. Tell me what you're working on at the moment.'

She wished she didn't have to tell him. What she

was going to say would probably alienate him completely.

'It's a film about Artemis,' she said, 'about her life and work.'

'I see,' he said, looking down at his glass. 'So I guess that's the real reason why you wanted to speak to me?'

'It was originally,' she said, 'but not now. We don't have to discuss it at all. It's been enough just to meet you and talk about Artemis. I shouldn't have imposed on you, anyway.'

She could imagine Morwenna's scorn if she could hear her throwing away all her advantages. But she was gradually liking Sandstrom more and more, and the last thing she wanted now was to let him feel used. He laid a hand on her arm.

'It's not an imposition any more,' he said. 'I think you'd better tell me about this film. I usually have dinner around this time. Won't you join me?'

In the Grill Room the black-patterned carpet was thicker still, the walls panelled with russet yew, the waiters sleek in tails. The surroundings breathed discreet luxury. Adrian had never brought her there, keeping it for those he most wished to impress.

The maitre d'hotel showed them to a corner banquette. To Saskia's relief the tables, all immaculately laid with dazzling white napery and bowls of roses, were set well apart, for when she'd walked into the room with Carl his presence had aroused quiet but intense interest among the other diners.

He studied his menu. 'Will you have shepherd's pie with me?' he asked. 'It's the best in the world here. I don't see it on the menu this evening, but they'll do it for me specially. I got to like it when I lived with Artemis. She was a terrible cook on the whole, but that was the one thing she could make well.'

Saskia nodded. Ben wouldn't believe it, she thought, if she told him she'd eaten shepherd's pie in the Savoy Grill, but she was too preoccupied to ask for something more exotic. Her mind was busy working out exactly how she was going put over the film to Carl.

'And langoustines to start with, I think,' he said. 'We don't want to be entirely British.'

When they arrived the wine waiter reverently poured out a bottle of Chablis. Carl lifted his glass to her.

'*Skol*,' he said.

She took a sip. It was like white velvet. 'It's wonderful,' she said.

'Worth coming across the Atlantic for. Now tell me about your film.'

'I didn't intend to approach you at all over it, but then I found some footage in Artemis's archives that I'd never seen before.'

She glanced up anxiously at him from her wine.

'It showed you and Artemis together in New Mexico.'

He closed his eyes briefly and took a deep breath. Then he smiled at her.

'I remember it very well,' he said. 'One of the cameramen was fooling around filming us when we weren't aware of him. We were at that stage when you don't take much notice of the outside world. When the story about us broke he threatened to sell the film. I paid one hell of a lot for that footage. My wife was in a rocky state, and I was worried she might get to see it.'

He drank some wine, and was silent for a moment. She wondered if she'd have to prompt him, but it wasn't necessary.

'I wanted to destroy the film,' he said, 'but Artemis wouldn't let me. She asked me if she could take it with her when we parted. Odd, really, because she was the

least sentimental of people. So what do you want to do with it? Not blackmail me, I hope?'

'Not quite as bad as that,' she said, smiling at him.

He laughed.

'Artemis looked just like that too when she was joshing me. So I guess you want to use it in your film? I can't stop you, of course, but the world's managed well enough without it so far.'

'If I could present your side of the story the world would have a true account of the affair at last. I want people to see Artemis as you and I knew her, not just as a heartless career woman. She was wonderful to me as a child, when my father died. She couldn't have been further from that portrayal of her.'

'When did your father die? Tell me about it.'

Slowly she related the story of her father's death, her mother's remarriage, and then her holidays at Gilead.

'Artemis always was a great rescuer,' he said. 'But if I may say so, she was lucky to have a great-niece like you. I've missed having someone young in my life. Yvette couldn't have children, and Artemis didn't want them. That was another thing we disagreed about at the end.'

'I'm sorry. That must have been very hard for you,' said Saskia.

'I went to Arizona and raised horses instead,' he said wrily.

They were ready for the main course by now. The shepherd's pie appeared under a silver dome, like no other shepherd's pie she'd ever seen. A creamy drift of mashed potato had been piped into a pattern worthy of a wedding cake, then perfectly crisped and browned over the succulent meat base.

'I've talked enough about myself,' he said, taking up his fork. 'Tell me exactly how you managed to move from Metropolis and set up your own company. You're very

young, and it must have been quite a risk. What did you do for funding?'

'Mortgaged Gilead,' she said, 'though I'm still not sure if Artemis would have approved.'

'She'd have told you to go for it, and been proud of you too.'

Saskia thought suddenly how good it was to be talking to him in this way. Much as she'd loved Artemis, she'd still longed in her teens for someone who could have provided the undemanding masculine affection and approval she'd lost when her father died.

The spacious room was almost full with diners, but there was no sense of overcrowding. In a quiet voice Sandstrom began to point out some of the other celebrities there. As she looked around her she saw to her dismay, at a far table, a familiar figure. It was Adrian, with the female lead in Metropolis's soap opera, Tina Vane, a lush blonde equally noted for her many appearances in the tabloid gossip columns.

They must have entered the room recently, for they'd only just been given the menu. Adrian was gazing about him, trawling as usual for contacts, and caught sight of Saskia. He looked astounded as he recognised her companion.

Her own consternation increased as Sandstrom also caught sight of a friend at another table.

'Would you forgive me for a moment?' he said to Saskia. 'I must speak to him. We haven't met for years. I won't be long.'

Adrian, whose eyes had never left them, bounded over to her the moment Carl had gone.

'Saskia darling,' he said, 'how amazing to meet you here. A bit out of your league, isn't it?'

'Get lost, Adrian,' she said. 'What I'm doing here is none of your business.'

'Very much my business, I should say. Isn't that Carl Sandstrom you're with? I've been trying to get in touch with him for months.'

'Get lost, I said. I don't want to talk to you.'

'My film's coming on brilliantly,' he said. 'I wonder if you've heard that LeValet's contributed extra funding? It's made all the difference. I've got a fabulous new discovery to play Carl, and I'm just about to sign up Tina Vane as Artemis.'

Saskia stared at him incredulously.

'Tina Vane! Not even you could dream up such a crass piece of casting.'

'She's bankable, and she'll add another five million to the ratings at least. Make-up will fix the rest.'

Saskia was taut with anger.

'She'll be a travesty of Artemis,' she said.

'Don't get so worked up, darling. You had every chance to produce the film your way, remember. But it's not too late, even now. If you come in with me, I'll willingly drop Tina and you can choose who you like for the role.'

Saskia saw that Sandstrom was threading his way back to them through the tables. She loathed the thought of involving him.

'Sod off, you bastard,' she hissed at Adrian. 'I've nothing more to say to you.'

'Is there some sort of problem here?' said Sandstrom, coming up behind him.

Adrian swung round, bared his teeth in his most dazzling smile, and thrust out his hand.

'Honoured to meet you, sir. I'm Adrian Greer, a very old friend of Saskia's from Metropolis Television. We were just discussing business. I'm sure you won't mind if I join you for a moment.'

Sandstrom ignored Adrian's hand.

'A friend?' he said. 'It didn't seem that way to me.'

He turned to Saskia. '*Do* you mind?' he asked.

'Yes, I do,' said Saskia. Her voice was hoarse with anger.

'In that case, Mr Greer, I think you'd better go straight back to your table. Otherwise, you might just find that it's needed for another guest.'

Adrian turned and saw the maitre d'hotel looking enquiringly at Sandstrom. He tried a last throw.

'I expect Saskia's been trying to bring you in on her film about Artemis Venner,' he said. 'I don't suppose you know that I'm making one for Metropolis on the same subject as well. Saskia's a sweet kid, but her company has no expertise and very little backing. If you'd let us have an interview we'd give you the top treatment.'

'I've had the top treatment before,' said Sandstrom. 'And you've already been asked to leave.'

Adrian gave a sulky shrug. He flung a furious look at Saskia and went back to his table, where she saw Tina Vane greeting him with a flood of questions. Saskia tried to regain her composure.

'Who exactly is that young whipper-snapper?' asked Sandstrom. 'Don't look so worried. He won't bother you again.'

'I wish that was true,' said Saskia. 'He was my boss at Metropolis. We didn't part on the best of terms.'

'Tell me about it,' said Sandstrom.

Saskia poured out the story, again judiciously omitting the fact that she'd lived with Adrian. Somehow she thought Sandstrom would approve even less than Munro. She ended by telling him that Adrian wanted Tina Vane to play Artemis's part.

'Mr Greer seems about as reliable as a sidewinder,' said Sandstrom. 'So that's another reason why this film about Artemis is so important to you, and why you need the New Mexico footage?'

'I'd have edited it just the way you wanted. But it really doesn't matter now. We can make the film without it.'

'It's suddenly beginning to matter to me a lot,' said Sandstrom, looking over at Tina Vane, who was laughing raucously at one of Adrian's remarks. 'I'm not especially keen to have Greer deliver some phoney version of our story after all these years. I'd like to go out with some kind of dignity. All right, you can use the film. And I'll do an interview for you, in return for one thing. Would you invite me to Gilead? I've a fancy to see Artemis's home at last.'

'Mind? Of course not. It'd be wonderful,' said Saskia, hardly able to believe what she was hearing. 'I can't thank you enough, Mr Sandstrom. I promise you won't regret it.'

'Call me Carl, please. Visiting Gilead might lay a few ghosts if I could see where Artemis lived after she left me, and somehow convince myself that she was happy again. I felt responsible for her even after we parted. She was so self-sufficient when I met her, and I deliberately set out to make her love me. Sometimes I think I should have let well alone.'

'I know Artemis didn't think that,' said Saskia.

'I wish I could believe you're right,' he said. 'But let's get down to business. When do you want me at Gilead?'

'Soon, if possible. We have a tight schedule.'

'I have to go back to the States tomorrow. The Concorde flights are fixed, and I don't think Martha would stand any more disruption of her schedule. She's a good friend in spite of that prickly exterior. But I'll be back next month for some bloodstock sales. Give me your phone number, and I'll get her to call you when we're home.'

Her success gave Saskia a much needed injection of confidence. Armed with the bait of the New Mexico footage and

Carl's interview, she sailed through her meetings the next day with Channel Five and the Americans. Channel Five were flatteringly ready to buy the film, and asked her to have it ready for a slot in late October. The representative of the major New York company who offered her funding had already been approached by Adrian and turned him down because he couldn't produce enough up-to-date footage on Carl. She heard on the grapevine that he'd had to do a tie-in with one of the smaller mid-west companies instead.

Morwenna was elated by Saskia's news.

'I knew you could do it if you tried. Shame, though, that we couldn't use Munro Hawkshaw's picture of Artemis for the end of the film. It'd sign it off perfectly. But maybe a shot zooming away from the house and across the plat might do instead.'

She was in the garden the day after Saskia returned from London, perched on top of the pergola while she tried to photograph the rill and Ben attempted to increase the flow of water from the fountain with a temperamental regulator. She was becoming increasingly exasperated as he failed to produce the exact effect she needed. At the far side of the grounds Freddy was tying back espaliers on the wall by the orangery, and Miss Moxon in a spring outfit of motheaten jodhpurs and a Breton fisherman's smock was vigorously weeding paths.

Morwenna and Miss Moxon had decided to accord each other a grudging respect. Morwenna said behind Miss Moxon's back that she was the last of the dinosaurs. Miss Moxon told Saskia in confidence that it was a pity that a young woman with so many outstanding qualities had such poor manners.

Freddy and Miss Moxon, on the other hand, had developed an immediate rapport through their mutual obsession with the garden. To signify her approval Miss

Moxon presented Freddy with a couple of Baby-gro suits from a church jumble sale, and a bottle of herbal tonic. Freddy, in return, blithely started to call her Al.

'Normally I wouldn't dream of letting anyone address me in that way,' Miss Moxon had said, 'but I feel sure the poor child's just trying to be friendly. I must say she copes splendidly with the dear baby, and her horticultural principles are very sound, very sound indeed.'

Ben had at last produced the right effect from the fountain, and scurried back to the kitchen, muttering something about trying the Esse again. He regarded it as a personal challenge, and still wouldn't let Saskia call in a repair man.

Slowly she returned to the house as well. She'd gone outside for a moment to enjoy the sunshine before continuing her battle to reduce their expenses as much as possible. It was all going to cost much more than she'd thought, now they had the shots mapped out in detail. The injection of outside funds would be a godsend.

She went round to the courtyard to check again on a tracking shot through the front door and into the hall. The air was sweet with the scent of hyacinths, and a magnolia had put forth a star-burst of blooms in the shelter of the outer wall. She was just deciding she'd have to spend more money hiring a steadi-cam, so that Morwenna had complete freedom of movement in the garden instead of being restricted by a tripod, when the bell rang at the outer gate. Infuriated by the interruption, she went to answer it.

She was astounded to find Munro standing there with an old canvas rucksack slung over one shoulder. He had a chequered Arab scarf wound loosely round his neck. He'd shaved, and looked unusually good-tempered.

'So you really do live here?' he said. 'I wondered if I'd come to the right place. I couldn't help thinking Artemis

had exaggerated when she told me about Gilead, but the reality's even better than her description.'

'I thought you hated visiting the city,' she said, still too astonished to be polite.

'I've brought back your cassette,' he answered. 'May I come in?'

He stepped into the courtyard and paused while Saskia relocked the outer door. He hesitated for a moment, as if he were searching for words not often used.

'And I came to apologise,' he said. 'Even though I was in Heathcliff mode the other day, it doesn't excuse my behaviour.'

She hadn't meant to, but she found herself apologising as well.

'It doesn't matter,' she said. 'I probably overreacted anyway.'

He looked at her for a moment as if to make sure she meant it, nodded, and then began to walk round the statue in the middle of the courtyard.

'Syrinx,' he said. 'Wasn't she a strong-minded nymph who got the better of Pan? Perfect symbolism, I should say.'

Saskia was about to rise indignantly to the bait when she saw he was laughing at her. He was unexpectedly attractive when he was in a good mood, but she wasn't convinced that made it worth weathering the bad ones. Still, it made it slightly easier to understand the reaction of a features editor friend from one of the glossy magazines whom she'd lunched with in London. Saskia had asked her casually what sort of reputation Munro had in the magazine world.

'Munro Hawkshaw!' her friend had exclaimed. 'That man could charm an interview out of a stone. He's a really nice guy too. Half the hackettes in London have been after him for years.'

Saskia managed to keep silent now as she led the way into the house, bracing herself to entertain him, and wondering distractedly what would happen when he met the others.

'She certainly lived in some style,' he said, surveying the drawing room. 'Do you like being here?'

'I love it. But I keep getting letters from feminists and anthropologists wanting me to turn Gilead into some sort of shrine. And the garden historians would like me to restore every blade of grass to exactly how it was seventy years ago. Sometimes I hardly feel it's mine anyway.'

'It must be quite tough living in the shadow of Artemis's personality. But someone like you shouldn't have any trouble.'

'Is this a social visit?' she asked, wondering exactly what his remark implied. 'Should I get out the best tea set and the doileys?'

'Definitely not the doileys,' he said with a grin. 'But some coffee would be good.'

He delved into his rucksack, and gave her a folder.

'Your cassette's in here,' he said, 'and the best of my Artemis photos. You can use them if you still want to.'

She tried to match his casual tone, and conceal her elation.

'Does this mean you actually looked at the film? I was sure you wouldn't bother.'

'It wasn't bad at all,' he said. 'You've got a remarkable eye for composing shots.'

Saskia had no intention of letting him know how unexpectedly pleased she was by the brief praise. She pulled the photos from the folder.

'Oh, thank you,' she said in delight. 'You've put in the one I liked so much, of Artemis on the donkey. We can use it for the final shot. But what a shame we couldn't have it in the brochure as well.'

'You've done a brochure so soon? You must have worked fast,' he said. 'May I take a look?'

She picked up a copy from a side table, and handed it to him. He began to leaf through it page by page, until he came to the centre-spread of Artemis and Carl. He stopped abruptly.

'Where did you get this?' he said. 'I've not seen it before.'

'It's a still from Artemis's own archive film.'

'Strong stuff,' he said, studying the photo. 'Poor guy – he was in pretty deep, by the look of it. If I were Sandstrom I shouldn't be too keen on having this resurrected.'

'I saw him on my trip to London last week. He's agreed to give us an interview, and he says we can use the archive film.'

'Really?' he said, raising his eyebrows at her. 'Yet you must have used this particular shot without asking him, since it was already in the promotion brochure.'

'All right, yes, I did,' she said, annoyed at his persistence, 'but it was only a one-off, and with so much stacked against us I had to do it. I bet you didn't stop to make ethical decisions over every little thing when you were starting out. And this is my decision, not yours.'

'Yes, of course it is, but this wasn't exactly a little thing. Anyway, I've told you what I think.'

'You're always doing that.'

'You're not uncritical at times either,' he said with a sidelong smile at her as he skimmed through the rest of the folder. He stopped again at a couple of photos on the last page accompanying some blurb about her and Morwenna.

Morwenna had put in a favourite shot of herself sitting on a roof top while she filmed a prison riot. Flames and smoke filled the background. Below it a studio photo of Saskia, in the role of company director, stared sternly at the camera.

'Christ,' said Munro. 'Who took this of you? I'm surprised you didn't turn your prospective buyers to stone.'

'Morwenna did. OK, I know portrait photography isn't exactly her strong point, but we were trying to impress clients with the seriousness of the project, after all, and worked it.'

Munro gave her a quizzical look.

'Well, apart from that, and the question of the New Mexico shot, I think it's terrific. No wonder everyone was impressed. Who did you see in London exactly?'

She gave him a brief resumé of her trip. He lounged back on the sofa, commenting now and then with still no trace of his earlier aggression, and Saskia began to think that his visit might not be the ordeal she'd anticipated. She forgot all about coffee until Ben came into the drawing room with the triumphant announcement that the Esse was working at last.

'Saskia and Morwenna often talk about you,' he said to Munro when they'd been introduced. 'Lunch is just ready. Why don't you stay and eat with us?'

'Thanks, I'd like that,' said Munro. 'You must fill me in on what they've been saying.'

A batch of bread had been set to prove on top of the Esse, and for the first time the kitchen was thoroughly warm. Munro took off his jacket, and sat down in the Windsor chair at the head of the table.

'It's watercress soup today,' Ben said, 'and I've made a terrine.'

'Ben's doing the company catering, but he was picketing that new motorway through the Wiltshire Downs before he and Morwenna came to stay at Gilead,' said Saskia, deciding it would be wiser to change the subject. 'We're lucky he could spare the time to help us.'

'The one near Salisbury? I went to have a look last weekend. I thought there might be a useful article in it,' said Munro.

Ben and Saskia stared at him.

'But you aren't working at the moment,' said Saskia.

'Just seeing if I could function properly still,' Munro said lightly.

'What did you think of it?' said Ben, eager-faced.

'I didn't much like the heavy-handed way the protesters were being controlled. They weren't doing any damage. Anyway, I've a piece in next Sunday's *Independent*, so you can see what I thought of it then.'

'I knew I should have gone back. I knew I was letting them down,' said Ben gloomily.

'Perhaps it was a good thing you didn't,' said Munro. 'Most of them were arrested.'

'It's the solidarity that counts.'

'How long were you there?' asked Munro.

Saskia was surprised by the sympathetic hearing he gave to Ben's account of the campaign. She'd have expected him to be uninterested in such petty concerns after the disasters he was used to. She heard the ringing tones of Miss Moxon in the back scullery as she washed her hands, and wondered if he'd adjust as easily to the others. Freddy was close behind, her hair sprinkled with dried apple leaves. She collapsed into a chair.

'You must take a look over the wall at LeValet's plot this afternoon, Saskia,' she said. 'There's a surveyor poking around in there, and someone from the council stuck a planning application on the gatepost. I nearly fell off the ladder trying to get a better view.'

'Damn,' said Saskia. 'That's all we need, just when we're so busy. It looks as if Laura really was right.'

Miss Moxon sat down more decorously. Her nose was pink at the tip, and her plait had fallen down.

'It pays to keep one jump ahead of that particular gentleman,' she said, 'not that he's worthy of the name.'

Ben gently removed the leaves from Freddy's hair.

'I suppose you really have been through a bush backwards,' he said to her. 'And you ought to be more careful on that ladder. It's not worth hurting yourself, even to keep tabs on LeValet.'

He brought the soup to the table in a tureen, and started to ladle it out. He'd been throwing anxious glances at the clock.

'I don't expect Morwenna'll remember to turn up,' he said gloomily. 'She went back to the flat to check her answering machine.'

'Saskia, my dear, you haven't introduced us,' said Miss Moxon, nodding at Munro. Hastily Saskia made the introductions. Miss Moxon extended a gracious hand still seamed with earth.

'And what do you do, Mr Hawkshaw?' she asked.

'I'm a photo-journalist, when I'm working.'

'Meaning you're not working now. Why is that? I find it hard to believe that anyone like you could be out of work, when we're so deluged with information by the media.'

'I've been away in East Africa. I'm on a kind of sabbatical at the moment.'

'I often think the suffering of the world could do with a rest from journalists. No wonder the public has compassion fatigue – dreadful expression.'

'On the other hand lack of publicity usually leads to something worse,' he said.

'You should do an article on those Happy Valley places of LeValet's,' said Miss Moxon. 'I'm becoming seriously concerned about a friend of mine in his Clifton home. I don't think she's getting enough to eat, and the rooms are icy.'

'Or how about something on the homeless in Bristol?' said Freddy. 'LeValet's bed and breakfast dumps exploit them just as much.'

'LeValet's a tough nut to crack,' he said. 'And what are you and Miss Moxon doing at Gilead? Perhaps I could help you with a little advice as well.'

In her enthusiasm the irony was lost on Freddy. 'We're restoring the garden. It's going to be ace. We found a wonderful little statue under a heap of ivy today, Saskia – a funny old guy with goat's legs playing a flute.'

'The great god Pan,' said Miss Moxon severely. 'I'd forgotten it was there. And a huge clump of *Crocus nudiflorus* beneath it.'

'Yeah, autumn crocus,' said Freddy. 'It needs splitting up. Why don't you come and look?'

'Would you like to see the garden?' Saskia said to Munro. 'I'm busy on the script, but I'm sure Alicia and Freddy would show you around after lunch.'

'And later on you could meet Jules, my baby,' said Freddy eagerly. 'He's having a nap just now.'

Saskia thought that this last prospect would be too much for Munro, but he accepted with what seemed like genuine enthusiasm.

Ten minutes later, when they'd started on the terrine, Morwenna sauntered in. She was wearing a studded leather jacket and a baseball cap turned back to front. She skimmed the cap on to the dresser and sat down, glowering at the others round the table.

Morwenna had had a hard morning. The messages on her answering machine had been more than usually garbled, the traffic on the way back into Clifton was worthy of a bank holiday, and it looked as though Ben was still sulking. She knew she shouldn't have cracked the whip so much earlier on. And now, to crown it all, she found that mega-chauvinist, Munro Hawkshaw, sitting down to

lunch with them. He was the last person she needed to see. She pointedly ignored him, and went over to the fridge.

'It's no good looking at me like that,' she said to Ben as she took out a can of lager. 'I can't help being late. The traffic's in gridlock out there.'

'You promised to be on time for meals. Can't you understand it's as important to me as photography is to you?'

'I had to ring New York, airhead. Sometimes I can't get away.'

'But it isn't sometimes, it's nearly all the time.'

'OK, if it's such a big deal I'll eat lunch on my own in future. I'll get a sandwich sent over from the deli. It'd be a lot more restful than this third degree.'

'I don't want you to do that. I just want you to be on time,' said Ben patiently.

Morwenna felt like shaking him. If only he'd be less of a door-mat, things would be so much better. But he was a truly sweet guy in spite of that, and she didn't want to lose him yet. She decided she'd better keep quiet for a bit.

As she dragged up a chair, and sat down, ripping back the top of her lager can, Munro was watching her with an inscrutable expression. She could imagine his thoughts and couldn't resist challenging him.

'So what are you doing here?' she said. 'Saskia said you weren't interested in helping us. Perhaps you don't believe a women's company could make a decent film.'

Saskia was frowning furiously at her, but she ploughed on.

'Or could it be sour grapes?' she said, taking a long swig of beer. 'I don't remember seeing anything new of yours recently.'

'You can think what you like,' he said. 'I came to lend Saskia my photos.'

'Well, bully for you,' said Morwenna. 'There's hope for the world yet.'

'Morwenna!' said Miss Moxon in an outraged voice. 'Do try to be pleasant. Mr Hawkshaw is a guest.'

Morwenna directed a scorching glance at her. The old bat was always sounding off like the voice of God, but had a knack of making her feel uncomfortable. Even Saskia was tight-lipped, and Ben was obviously on the verge of culinary histrionics. She decided to keep quiet and enjoy her meal. She took a slice of terrine and the remains of the salad, and started to eat.

Saskia heaved a sigh of relief. Morwenna was becoming more and more impossible again, and she knew that soon she'd be forced to have things out with her, before she soured the atmosphere at Gilead completely.

She looked over to Munro. He was listening to Miss Moxon, who was busy inviting him to tea one Sunday to show him photos of her school in India. It was her highest accolade, and Saskia began to understand how he'd acquired his reputation.

The rest of the meal was relatively calm. Jules stayed asleep, and apart from a few minor darts Morwenna was silent too. Nevertheless Saskia saw Munro depart into the garden with Miss Moxon and Freddy with some relief.

She worked for half an hour on the script, then braced herself to go and look at the developments on LeValet's land. So far she'd managed to ignore his threats in the excitement of getting the film off the ground, but now they were like an oil slick being driven in by the tide, visible at last, and waiting to contaminate everything they touched.

She walked down to the orangery. A few late camellias were blooming just inside the door, but at least half the floor space was still taken up with tree ferns and palms. Freddy had left the ladder against the boundary wall, and

she began to climb it, feeling nervous and unsteady as the drop beneath her increased. At least today she was wearing a sweater and short flared skirt instead of a suit. Strangely she hadn't worried at all when she'd scrambled up the espalier with Miss Moxon encouraging her.

When she looked over she saw that the surveyor had indeed been busy. All the vegetation was cleared, including the trees. Foundation lines of an extensive building were pegged out over the derelict land, and ran just a few feet away from the whole length of the party wall.

Her dismay grew when she saw LeValet and his minder come out of a Portakabin which had been erected by the gate. They went into the road. LeValet scanned the planning application for a moment, and then they began to walk in the direction of Gilead. Too late Saskia saw that Freddy had left the side gate ajar.

LeValet and the minder walked straight in, and went over to the orangery. She decided he'd imposed on her for the last time.

'I don't want visitors, Mr LeValet,' she called down at him. 'Please go away.'

He looked up at her, gave an unctuous smile, and stayed exactly where he was. The minder hooked his chewing gum out of his mouth, flattened it into a shiny pink blob on the glass, and began to chew a fresh strip. LeValet put his hand on the orangery door.

'I mean it. You're trespassing now,' she shouted.

As she began to climb down the ladder the minder ambled over, and clamped his hand on one of the side rails, staring interestedly up her legs. Her agitation grew as she continued downwards, and felt the ladder shift alarmingly as he gave it several experimental, teasing shakes.

'Cut that out!' she shouted at him. 'Call your heavy off, LeValet. I don't want either of you here.'

LeValet seemed unmoved by her outburst. He waited

for her to reach the ground, then gestured to the minder to go back to the gate.

'I asked you both to leave,' she said, 'you and your thug.'

LeValet took no notice. Instead he pushed open the orangery door. Enraged, she rushed after him into the warm damp air. He still ignored her, and sat down on one of the cast-iron chairs. He took a thin black cigar from a gold case, and lit it, exhaling a cloud of smoke.

'Put that out,' she said angrily. 'It'll harm the plants.'

'So you were interested in my new project,' he said. 'I thought you might be in the end.'

'You haven't got planning permission yet,' she said.

'No, not yet, but I shall. I'm afraid you may find the building operations disruptive – so much noise from earth-moving machinery, not to mention sledge-hammers and pneumatic drills. But you must have been prepared to accept that when you turned down my offer.'

'I'm not prepared to accept anything of the sort. I'm going to oppose your application.'

'Really, my dear? Well, you're welcome to try, but I think you'll find it's a waste of time and money.'

'We'll see. For now I want you both off my land.'

He got up in a leisurely way and went to the door, pausing en route to tear off a camellia and tuck it in his button-hole.

'Beautiful plants,' he said, 'but as you know, prone to blight. And unfortunately building works do cause pollution – diesel fumes, spray paints, dust, all that sort of thing.'

He was outside now, and beckoning to the minder. The man came over and stood impassively by, hands like hams hooked into his belt.

'You've met some of my workmen already,' he said.

'Like my friend here they're good lads, but they can be careless at times.'

Saskia was determined not to listen a moment longer. She went to open the gate and urge them out, but the minder deliberately stood in her path. Every time she tried to go round him he side-stepped her as neatly as a boxer.

'Get out of my way, you gorilla,' she yelled at him. In spite of all her efforts at self-control, panic was beginning to creep up on her. 'I'll call the police.'

'He's just being playful,' said LeValet. 'No one could object to that.'

'Don't count on it, LeValet,' said a voice behind Saskia.

She whirled round, and saw Munro, his camera slung round his neck, standing just inside the orangery door.

'How did you get here?' she said, dazed.

He seemed to have appeared from nowhere. Then she realised he must have come through the door at the far end and been hidden by the palms. He walked over to her side. His face was grim.

'I was doing some peaceful art photography until I was interrupted. And now beat it, LeValet, and take Godzilla with you.'

The minder made a sudden lurch towards the Nikon. Munro instantly grabbed his arm, wrenched him round in an arm lock, and pushed him sprawling away.

Saskia stared at Munro. His reaction had been so unexpected and so violent. The minder's physical intimidation on top of the emotional blackmail had terrified her, but now she was even more scared of a full-scale fight between him and Munro.

LeValet's mouth was a thin, bloodless line. He shook his head at his henchman, who was swearing and clutching his arm, then turned to Munro.

'I'll remember you,' he said.

'You do that,' said Munro.

'And I realise that you're in an over-emotional state, Saskia my dear, but for your own sake and your mother's you should think very, very seriously about my suggestions.'

LeValet jerked his head at the minder, and started to make for the gate. The man shambled after him, shaking his head as if he couldn't believe what had happened. They disappeared into the road, and a few moments later she heard the sound of a car revving away.

Munro waited till the two men had gone, then went and shut the gate firmly behind them. He was surprised at his own behaviour. He hadn't acted like that since he'd come across a Somali bandit beating up an old woman in Mogadishu. He'd been lucky to take the minder by surprise.

He followed Saskia into the orangery, taking off his camera to stow it away in the rucksack which he'd left on a chair. She was angrily shaking a cigar, presumably LeValet's, from a pot of violets. It fell to the ground and she crushed it under her foot.

'Over-emotional?' she said. 'How dare he say that? I felt so helpless. I couldn't think of any way to stop them.'

She pushed her hair away from her face, and he could see her hands trembling. She caught his glance and put them behind her back. Something about the gesture touched him. He laid the camera down, and almost automatically, as if reassuring a child, put his arms round her.

'It was only bluff – bluff and bullying. LeValet's too squeamish to do any more.'

He could feel her heart hammering against her ribs, and the warm softness of her breasts pressed against his chest. He suddenly wanted to slide his hands under her sweater and feel her skin. The last woman he'd held like

this had been Sabah, the night before she was killed. But her body had been sturdier and more solid, the body of an African woman accustomed to hard physical work. He moved one hand down Saskia's ribs to the point where her waist narrowed and then flowed out gently to her hip.

She pulled back her head and looked up at him. She was still very pale.

'I thought he was going to attack you,' she said in a low voice.

'Not a chance,' he said, hoping she'd believe it.

'I hate violence, especially here at Gilead.'

'I hate bullies,' he said. 'Would you rather I'd given him some counselling instead?'

She gave an uncertain smile, and shook her head. He suspected she'd only just stopped herself from crying.

'He's put in a planning application for his land now,' she said, 'but I'll fight him all the way. I'll never let him harm Gilead.'

The sheer scale of her determination in the face of such an enemy touched him again. He bent his head and kissed her. He'd meant it simply as a sort of accolade, but her lips were warm and her skin had a faint lemony scent. He suddenly felt as if a truce had been called in some seemingly endless battle. For a moment she relaxed in his arms, and then she pulled away once more and stared up at him, her face suspicious.

'It's not fair to do this because you need a substitute for Sabah,' she said.

The words shocked him into trying to think clearly. He seemed to have been acting on the spur of the moment, something he rarely did, all day. Kissing her still felt right, but it was probably true that he wasn't nearly ready for a new involvement, and she clearly had no time for anything else but her film-making. It could be disastrous for them both.

He was bracing himself to apologise yet again when his eye was attracted by a movement outside the orangery. Saskia, with her back to the garden, didn't see it. A moment later Morwenna appeared at the door. She peered in and caught sight of them both. Her look of disbelieving, disapproving horror was too much for him to take.

'I wish you'd stop the psychology, just for a minute,' he said gently to Saskia. 'You're not a substitute. Far from it.'

He kissed her again. His hands were in her hair. It was as long and fine as cornsilk, so unlike Sabah's exuberant curls, and yet the difference didn't seem to matter any more. Her lips parted, and he felt her arms slide round his neck. When he eventually looked up, Morwenna had gone.

Chapter 11

The first kiss had been more comforting than arousing. As soon as Saskia started to think more clearly she'd drawn back, worried about Munro's motives and the possibility of things developing, Adrian fashion, into a rapid full-scale assault. She should have used the technique perfected long ago to turn off male film crews who never could resist trying their luck. That would have meant coolly disentangling herself, and then telling him sweetly that she was flattered of course, but she'd grown out of teenage games long ago.

Because she was still shaken by the encounter with LeValet, she'd deflected him tactlessly, blurting out her suspicions like a schoolgirl. He hadn't let her go, but tightened his arms. His lips were more insistent this time, and his hands moved beneath her sweater, his fingers on her bare skin tracing the channel of her spine. The incident with LeValet must have left her more vulnerable than she'd realised, for she found herself unexpectedly responding. When he eventually drew back she felt as she'd been overtaken by an avalanche on some innocuous country walk.

'That was nice,' he said lightly.

Still bewildered by her reaction, she backed away from him, almost tripping over a sack of compost.

'Maybe for you,' she said.

'Come on now.' His voice was annoyingly calm. 'Perhaps it wasn't very important, but we both liked it.'

For the second time that afternoon Saskia felt like bursting into tears, just at the worst possible moment, when it was vital to make him understand exactly what was involved.

'It can't possibly work. I've got far too many problems already. I can't cope with anything else.'

'But I simply kissed you, that's all.' He put his hands on her shoulders, and she got the impression that he was trying to convey some of his own nonchalance to her.

'It seemed more than a simple kiss to me,' she said.

Munro took a deep breath. She was looking at him with enormous eyes, her arms wrapped round her body as if he'd fully intended to ravish her. He'd been a fool to start any of this. Yet only a little while ago he'd been thinking that after Sabah no woman could ever attract him again.

'For Christ's sake, you're behaving as though I'm bent on some Victorian seduction. Can't we just be friends?'

'What sort of friends?' she said suspiciously.

'And stop taking everything I say the wrong way.'

He gave her a little shake. She smiled, unwillingly.

'All right,' she said. 'But you must be serious. We can't leave things like this.'

He hesitated, wondering how he could convince her that the last thing he wanted was a deep involvement of any kind.

'Deadly serious from now on, I swear,' he said. 'Perhaps we'd better go and talk outside. It's hard to be sensible when everything round you looks like the set of a Viennese opera.'

He held open the door, and she went ahead of him into the garden. The air was cooling, though it was sunny still. A blackbird sang on the topmost branch of the cedar. They started down the long walk. He noticed how she kept the width of the path between them.

'So, what are these problems of yours?' he asked.

'You know already. The house and the film. I've mortgaged one to pay for the other. But LeValet most of all. I never thought he'd go as far as this. I'm not sure I'm capable of taking him on, but I have to. Gilead means everything to me. It's my security.'

'Security doesn't necessarily lie in things,' he said, 'though I might have thought so before I met Sabah. Gilead is only a house, after all. Don't let it mean too much.'

'Of course it won't,' she said. 'That's a ridiculous idea.'

'I probably sound cynical to you, but you do have to be realistic about LeValet. A lot of people have been trying to get the better of him for a very long time, and no one's succeeded. You've already got a lot on your hands with the film. Maybe you should simply let him go ahead? The site's a long way from the house, after all, and once the actual building's finished there's not much more he can legally do.'

'Except that I'll be reminded of him all the time. He's already told me what to expect in the way of harassment while the home's being built,' said Saskia. 'It's bound to be a monstrosity as well. And as for what'll go on inside . . .'

She was silent for a moment, and Munro remembered Miss Moxon's words at lunchtime about her friend in the Happy Valley home.

'No, I have to keep fighting him, even if it is the wrong decision,' she said.

'It's a brave one anyway. But you should be careful.'

'I'm surprised you don't have a go at LeValet yourself after all you've said.'

'I did before Sabah died,' he said. 'I've been trying to pin him down for years over his drugs scam. But I'm not ready

yet to try again. You need a certain amount of detachment for that kind of work.'

Munro stopped. They'd entered the first of the enclosed gardens. The sheltering yew hedges towered above their heads, dense and green, flecked with pale new shoots. The brick path which ran round the perimeter reflected back a gentle warmth. The central flower-bed was crammed with scyllas which lapped at their feet in a blue tide.

'This garden keeps springing surprises,' he said, looking around him. 'It doesn't make it very easy to concentrate. But carry on. Tell me what we should do about us.'

'I'm sure it'd be best if we just kept things on a professional basis,' she said, but her voice was doubtful in spite of her words.

Her loose-necked sweater had slipped down over one shoulder. She lifted her hands to her hair, pulling it to the top of her head in a distracted way. She was wearing a necklace of turquoise beads. The skin beneath it was milky pale. He was finding it impossible to be sensible any more. He pulled her gently into the shelter of the hedge, took her in his arms, and kissed her, first in the hollow of her shoulder, and then on her lips. She gave a curious despairing groan, but began to respond again.

Very cautiously he moved one hand under her sweater and round to her breast. It was surprisingly full, and fitted softly into his palm. Through a layer of satin he could feel her nipple like a small closed bud. He smoothed his fingers over it, and it began to harden. She sighed, and even more cautiously he began to move his other hand towards the catch of her bra.

Saskia, on the point of abandoning the serious talk completely, was jolted back into rational thought by the sound of raised voices through the hedge. Morwenna was yelling at Ben to get out of shot. The sun went in, and a sudden breeze scurried through the garden. She heard

Munro swear softly. She tried to pull away, dreading that the others might burst in on them, but her hair had caught in the yew, and she had to stand in a fever of impatience, trying to avoid his eyes, while he disentangled it.

He smiled as he extricated the last strand.

'It's not the vice squad, you know,' he said. 'But I'm not quite ready for another lecture from Captain Bly, and it is getting late. Perhaps I should go back and collect my things.'

They started down along the long walk again. Saskia tried unobtrusively to rearrange her sweater and her hair. She was horrified by the way she'd almost lost control of the situation.

'So you really want this to be a business relationship,' he said.

'I'm not sure,' she answered, wishing she could feel less confused. 'You're so casual about everything. I only know what I have to do, and that I shouldn't let anything get in the way.'

'Yet you seemed to like what we were doing back there.'

'Of course I did,' she broke out, maddened by this parrying. 'That worries me as well. If we let things go on perhaps I'll get to like it too much, and then there'll be all the hurt of when you leave me. Or else, because I'm so preoccupied with the film, I'll do something to offend you when I don't mean to, and that'd be almost worse.'

'You must have known some screwed-up guys before this,' he said.

They'd arrived back at the orangery, and he disappeared inside for a moment, returning with his rucksack.

'There's really no need for such a heavy scene,' he said, carefully doing up the buckles. 'It's pretty obvious that neither of us wants anything like that just now. And I'm going away shortly anyway.'

'Going away? Where? Not Africa?' She couldn't understand why she felt so disappointed when she should have been relieved.

'No, just home to Yorkshire for a couple of weeks. It's my parents' wedding anniversary and the family's throwing a party for them. Let's see how we feel about things when I get back.'

'Won't you stay just a little longer?' she said, even more dismayed as he picked up the grip. 'You'd like Morwenna once you got to know her. And Ben will have tea ready shortly.'

'I like Ben. He's a nice guy. It's a pity he lets her get away with it. But I think it's best if I go now.'

He grinned at her expression. 'Come on, it's only for a fortnight after all, and I'm doing exactly what you wanted.'

He gave her a brisk kiss on her cheek, slung the rucksack over his shoulder, and made for the gate. He turned as he went through.

'And make sure you keep it locked,' he said. 'I'd like to find you in one piece when I get back.'

Saskia watched the gate close behind him. She turned the key, and sat down on a bench outside the orangery door. Her body felt as if it had woken out of a long sleep. She kept trying without any success to think constructively, but the garden was grey and dreary without the sun, and eventually she became so cold that she started back to the house. Perhaps talking to the others would put things in proportion again.

She entered the drawing room by the French window. Miss Moxon and Morwenna weren't there, but Freddy was on the sofa, her bare feet towards the fire, reading an old gardening magazine. She wore her favourite work clothes, green army surplus trousers whose pockets bulged

with secateurs and string, and a skinny red sweater with holes in the elbows. Ben had abandoned the tea trolley, and was on all fours in his striped apron crawling about the room after Jules.

Freddy and Jules were good for Ben. She was always hungry, and praised his cooking lavishly. Better still, she gently pushed him into standing up for himself more. One teasing remark from her had more effect than all Morwenna's bludgeonings. Ben was almost as besotted with Jules as Freddy was. He spent hours concocting baby dinners for him, and had set up an elaborate intercom system between the kitchen and the nursery so that he could baby-sit while Jules was asleep.

Saskia poured herself a cup of tea and took it and a piece of coffee cake glossy with walnut-studded icing to the sofa opposite Freddy.

'Hi,' said Freddy, looking up from an article on old-fashioned roses, her other great love. 'Where's Munro? Has he gone?'

'He was busy,' lied Saskia, keeping her eyes on her tea.

'I never met anyone famous before,' said Freddy. 'He's great. I thought most war photographers were crazy Mad Max types, but he's not like that at all. He said he'd take some photos of Jules and me.'

Ben came round the side of the sofa with Jules in his arms, and gently dumped him on to the hearthrug. Jules staggered up, clutching Saskia's leg and dribbling profusely. She took him in her lap and rested her chin on his silky head. There was something comforting about his solid little body. He began to play with her necklace.

'You look shattered, Saskia,' said Ben, sitting down next to Freddy. 'Are you all right?'

'I've just had another encounter with LeValet,' she said.

She told them the story, trying to keep it as unalarming as possible.

'Jesus, I'm sorry,' said Freddy. 'That was my fault. I should have locked the gate. But what a shit LeValet is. You ought to get a really mean dog, like the travellers have. That'd see him off next time.'

'I don't think Sven would much like a dog,' said Saskia.

The cat had just stalked into the room, and was looking at the occupant of her lap with extreme disfavour.

'How did you get him to go in the end?' said Freddy.

'I didn't,' said Saskia. 'I was useless. It ended with Munro having to see them both off.'

'Didn't I say Munro was a great guy?' said Freddy delightedly.

'Where have Morwenna and Alicia got to?' asked Saskia, decidedly unwilling to embark on a discussion of his virtues.

'Al's gone to see her mate in the Happy Valley home. She's been really steamed up about her lately. And Morwenna was mad about something when she came in, and went off to the study.'

'She's probably mad with me,' said Ben, 'though I'm not sure why this time.'

'No, she wasn't,' said Freddy. 'And if you get worked up it makes her worse. Give me Jules, Saskia, then you can drink your tea in peace. You must need it after that run-in with LeValet.'

They chatted until Freddy and Ben went off to give Jules a bath. Saskia turned down an invitation to join in, knowing she ought to find out what was wrong with Morwenna. It was puzzling because she hadn't been particularly upset by Munro's presence at lunchtime.

Morwenna was in the studio trimming prints. She wore an ancient lab coat belted with Ben's old school tie.

Her hair was rumpled, and her eyes narrowed as Saskia appeared. She slammed down the hinged cutter blade as if she were decapitating someone.

'What's the matter?' said Saskia.

'I should have thought it was obvious. Have you flipped your lid completely?'

'What on earth are you talking about?'

'Munro Hawkshaw, of course.'

'But he brought us the photos,' said Saskia. 'Aren't you pleased?'

'It's only what he should have done anyway. But it wasn't that. I saw you together afterwards.'

Saskia sat down heavily on one of the high stools, trying to gather her wits.

'I didn't mean to,' Morwenna went on. 'I was waiting for Ben to come and help me set up a shot, and I decided to have a look at LeValet's site myself.'

'Where did you see us?' asked Saskia, praying it wasn't in the enclosed garden.

'In the orangery, of course.'

'Oh, that,' said Saskia, deciding rapidly that nonchalance was the best defence. 'He just took me by surprise. It didn't mean much. I think he'd been without a woman for a bit too long.'

'You certainly seemed to let him go on for a bit too long. Is there something happening that I don't know about?'

'Of course not. Don't be so bloody touchy. And even if there were, it's nothing to do with you.'

'It's got everything to do with all of us, because of the film. An affair with someone like him would be disastrous just now.'

'I am not starting an affair,' said Saskia, beginning to lose her temper. 'But I don't see what's so wrong with him. You're coming across as though he's a serial killer.'

'I know his sort,' said Morwenna scornfully. 'They're

the worst, the unhappy ones. They expect you to bolster them up, then when they've drained you of sympathy and stopped you concentrating on your work, they push off to pastures new. It's just the sort of line you would fall for.'

'He's a nice guy, in spite of what you say, but I certainly haven't fallen for him. And he's gone away now. I don't know when he'll be back, so see if you can work that into an affair.'

'Huh, the oldest trick in the book,' said Morwenna, picking up the paper she'd just trimmed away, and crushing it into a ball. 'He's probably done it on purpose to hot you up. And what do you know about him, apart from the fact that he had this Ethiopian girlfriend? He must be thirty-two or three at least. Why wasn't he shacked up with someone long ago?'

'That's beside the point,' said Saskia angrily, 'but he was probably on the move too much to set up anything long-term.'

'OK then, what about the Ethiopian herself? Maybe she wasn't shot. Maybe she had AIDS, and that's why he's skulking around here, too scared to take the test. He can't be a good risk if he's worked so long in Africa.'

Saskia finally lashed back at Morwenna.

'That's a rotten thing to say. If it was true I'm sure he wouldn't have tried anything. He's too damn' moral as it is. And he's certainly not the type to be scared. He saw off LeValet and his minder this afternoon.'

Morwenna sat down slowly, and threw the handful of mangled paper into a basket, staring at Saskia.

'LeValet was here again? Did he threaten you? What happened?'

Saskia told her. Morwenna's face grew more and more incredulous.

'Jesus, I never thought he'd try anything like that. And Hawkshaw really took on the minder? Then I take it back

about him, most of it anyway. I suppose these macho blokes do have their uses sometimes.'

'Good,' said Saskia. 'It's about time you realised they're not all ravening beasts. So will you please cut it out and stop this crazy arguing? I hate it when we fight.'

'Especially over a man,' said Morwenna slowly. 'We must be mad.'

She gave a sudden grin, then jumped up and gave Saskia a quick hug, nearly asphyxiating her with the smell of developing fluid. Saskia narrowly prevented herself from crying for the third time.

'I'm sorry, Sass, truly I am. I don't know why I've been like this. I think it's because of Ben. He's been driving me insane all day. He wasted a whole hour fixing some spinachy little mess for Jules, just when I needed him to help me.'

'But you liked Ben so much when you started out together. You said he was the only sensitive guy you'd ever met.'

'It was true,' said Morwenna, 'and he is still terrific in bed, though I had to teach him a few things. I was determined to get him away from that awful mother of his, but I don't think he'll ever get over her. He's totally unmotivated. He ought to be thinking about setting up his own business by now, but he never gets his act together. Sometimes I feel so frustrated trying to move him on.'

'Perhaps you try too hard.' Saskia wondered whether to say the next words. 'Freddy seems to be able to get him to do things. Have you noticed?'

'If he wants to be an unpaid nanny, that's his funeral. I've decided I haven't got the time to worry about him at the moment, and nor have you.'

'Well, at least he's happy,' said Saskia diplomatically. 'Anyway, tell me how things went this afternoon. Have

you got everything worked out now? I'd like to start shooting proper next week. We could go over to Cheltenham and do those sequences at Artemis's old school. I've at last managed to persuade the head that we aren't making a second *Dynasty*.'

After four days in Cheltenham, reassuring a wary headmistress and keeping the male lighting crew and the sixth form firmly apart, a visit to the city planning offices seemed almost welcome. All the same, Saskia still felt slightly sick whenever she looked at the official notice of proposed development which had arrived in her letter-box the day after the encounter with LeValet. She was finding the pace at which they were having to make the film took all her energy, and the prospect of a battle with LeValet was beginning to seem less appealing in spite of her earlier decision. And on top of everything else she still hadn't made up her mind what to do about Munro.

Miss Moxon insisted on accompanying Saskia to the council planning offices, and on walking there rather than taking the car.

'It'll do you good to have some exercise. And I've taught so many Clifton children in Sunday school during long leaves that you may find my official contacts quite handy. It's clear as a pikestaff that if you don't have some help you'll run yourself into the ground.'

Once they'd entered the imposing pillared doorway of the council planning offices in St George's Road, and gone through a discreet fawn-carpeted reception area dotted with palms to an enquiry desk, Saskia found Miss Moxon was right. One of the planning officers had been her pupil in the sixties, and he greeted her like an old friend. They were whisked into a side room, and LeValet's plans were spread out in front of them.

Saskia reeled when she saw the architect's drawing

of the elevation. The proposed building looked like a hybrid of a public lavatory and a remand home. It was built of featureless cast concrete slabs, with a flat roof from which a grandiose brick bell tower stuck out like an inflamed thumb. The accommodation block ran the length of the boundary wall adjoining Gilead's garden, and was punctuated by ranges of cell-like windows, three storeys high.

'Even worse than we expected,' Miss Moxon said. 'One wonders how he gets away with these horrors. Even if he did manage to acquire Gilead and amalgamate the two sites, it couldn't possibly raise the tone of that eyesore.'

'The building's on a different scale from the garden, so it seems smaller than it really is. And look at all these huge trees drawn in, when he's already flattened every bit of vegetation.' Saskia turned to the official. 'How does LeValet get away with it?' she asked. 'Even a five year old could see how hideous it is.'

'We just don't know. Everyone in the planning department loathes what he's done in Bristol. The committee invariably throws out his plans, but then there's an inquiry, he brings on a top London lawyer, discreetly greases some wheels in Westminster, and suddenly it's through. Why, are you thinking of opposing this?'

'Wouldn't you?' said Saskia. 'What do you think my chances are?'

'I can hardly bear to look at the plans, but quite frankly you might as well save your time and energy. It's years since he lost an appeal.'

After a further discouraging conversation, Saskia and Miss Moxon went outside into the bustle of the city. Saskia stood on the pavement as cars hurtled by, feeling even less resolute about all the probably useless work canvassing for local support would entail.

'Chop chop, my dear,' said Miss Moxon. 'We don't want to ruin our lungs with carbon monoxide.'

She started off up Park Street at a tremendous rate, swinging a mysterious holdall which she'd insisted on bringing with her. Saskia followed, having some difficulty keeping up, and wondering why she wasn't going directly back to Gilead. Miss Moxon zipped to the left up Great George Street like an Olympic miler, and didn't stop until she'd reached the small park on Brandon Hill.

They sat down on a bench above a grassy slope. The city was spread out beneath them, stretching from the raffish Georgian charms of Hotwells down to the Avon, past the stately hulks of old sailing ships, and over to the glittering high rise offices of the commercial area. Beyond them it faded into a line of hazy blue hills.

'I never tire of this view,' said Miss Moxon. She looked sideways at Saskia. 'It makes anything that spoils the character of the city seem even more reprehensible.'

'I know exactly what you're trying to tell me,' said Saskia dispiritedly, 'but it's no use. After what we've heard this morning I'm beginning to think I'd never find enough time and energy to oppose LeValet and make a good job of the film.'

'I remember sitting here once with Artemis when she felt like giving up too,' said Miss Moxon.

'Artemis?' said Saskia incredulously. 'But she was the most optimistic person I've ever met.'

'Not then. She'd just returned from America. It was glorious spring weather, very like today, but we were all tired and depressed after the war. Most of the city centre had been flattened by bombs. It seemed as if it'd never recover.'

'But that can't have been the only reason,' said Saskia.

'Naturally she was still suffering from the effect of that

unfortunate Hollywood episode, but something else was troubling her as well. She talked of giving up her work in Africa.'

Saskia stared at Miss Moxon, hardly able to believe her ears.

'But she'd left Carl to go back to Africa.'

'I know. It didn't make sense to me either, especially coming from someone as level-headed as Artemis. In the end I was forced to give her a little lecture. I said she'd been sent into the world with special talents, and it would be criminal to waste them. I told her she had a duty to her tribe in Africa who'd been waiting so long for her return, and I was sure the Lord had a special purpose for her there.'

'I shouldn't think she was very pleased with that,' said Saskia, smiling. 'She was a confirmed atheist.'

'You're right. I'm afraid I offended her deeply. But perhaps it made her think. She went away soon afterwards to stay with her sister Phoebe in Northumberland, and returned to Africa in the autumn.'

Saskia dimly remembered Phoebe, her grandmother, who'd died long ago, as a quiet, homely woman, only like Artemis in her warm-heartedness. She'd had one other child besides Saskia's father, a girl called Meg. Meg took over the tenancy of the farm eventually, but never married, becoming dourer and dourer as time went by. Artemis had little in common with her, Laura disliked her intensely, and Saskia hadn't seen her aunt for years.

'But Artemis's case isn't at all like mine, if that's what you're trying to say,' said Saskia. 'I daren't let anything distract me from the film. If I can't pay off the mortgage I'll lose Gilead altogether.'

'What about those old people incarcerated in LeValet's new home, and literally starved, both of physical and

spiritual nourishment? They'd always be there, right on Gilead's doorstep, as a constant reproach.'

'Maybe you're right,' said Saskia, wishing she'd never got into this uncomfortable discussion, 'but I still don't feel confident that I've the resources to take him on.'

'Then before you finally make up your mind, I want you to do one thing for me,' said Miss Moxon. 'I have to visit my friend in the Clifton home after this. I want you to come and see what it's like for yourself. Then I promise never to mention it again.'

After ringing the bell at the Happy Valley home for several minutes, Saskia and Miss Moxon at last saw a suggestion of movement through a peephole in the front door. Bolts were drawn back noisily, and the door opened to reveal a plump middle-aged woman in a navy uniform, with a lace cap perched on a heavily streaked mop of Tina Turner hair.

'Oh, it's you, Miss Moxon,' she said. 'I'm afraid your friend isn't well enough for visitors today.'

'Nonsense,' said Miss Moxon. 'A visit will do her a world of good.'

She planted her foot firmly over the threshhold and was inside before the woman could stop her. Saskia followed admiringly.

They were in a large hall carpeted in ruby wool splashed with gold flowers. A chandelier blazed above their heads. By the stairs hung a life-size painting of LeValet which made him look as genial as Mr Pickwick. Through a door marked 'Matron's Office' Saskia could see an armchair pulled up to a glowing gas fire.

'Well, just this once, then,' said the woman, with a longing glance back at the armchair. 'But please don't upset her this time. We had to increase her medication after your last visit. You know the way, don't you?'

She disappeared into the office, revealing a long ladder in the back of her black stocking.

'I strongly doubt whether that woman's got a nursing certificate to her name,' said Miss Moxon. 'She was just a ward orderly in another of LeValet's nursing homes before she came here.'

She pushed resolutely through baize-lined swing doors at the back of the stairs, and Saskia followed her into a different world.

The flooring changed abruptly to ill-fitting carpet squares, and the temperature became at least ten degrees lower. They rounded a corner into a long corridor, where the carpet changed again to scuffed plastic tiles and unshaded light bulbs glared down from the ceiling. The corridor was lined on either side with blank, closed doors. There was a pervasive, acrid smell Saskia last remembered encountering outside a French *pissoir*.

'Disgraceful,' said Miss Moxon. 'It's grossly understaffed. They shut the old folk away in their rooms for most of the day. The recreation room's just rows and rows of chairs, and the food's appalling too. Tilly did try to complain when she first came here, but she was immediately labelled unstable, and given a double dose of tranquillisers. Maybe some of the poor souls are half mad, but only with loneliness and anxiety.'

They came to a flight of concrete stairs, where they trudged up to the second floor, and another corridor. Alicia knocked on one of the doors, and a feeble voice quavered at them to enter.

The room was the shape of a shoe box, and contained a narrow single bed, a small armchair upholstered in mottled vinyl, and a minute chest of drawers. A television with almost inaudible sound flickered at the foot of the bed. Through an adjoining door Saskia saw a tiny cramped bathroom. The air smelt sour, but the one window, which

urgently needed cleaning and looked down an iron fire escape into a walled yard full of dustbins, was firmly closed.

On the side of the bed sat a very old woman, clutching a worn leather handbag to her chest. Her cardigan was stained with food, and buttoned askew. Her stockings hung in loose wrinkles. She had a shock of thistle-down hair framing washed-out blue eyes. A look of intense relief came over her face when she saw them.

Miss Moxon embraced her affectionately, clasping her hands as she stood back to survey her.

'You feel so cold, Tilly. Is there still something wrong with the heating?'

'They turn it down on the first of March,' said the old woman. 'It's the rules.'

Miss Moxon switched off the television, and carefully rebuttoned Tilly's cardigan.

'There,' she said, 'that's a slight improvement. I've brought a friend to see you. She's Artemis's great-niece, Saskia. She's living at Gilead.'

'Gilead,' said Tilly, her eyes brightening slightly. 'Such a beautiful garden, I remember. But I don't suppose I shall ever see it again.'

She held out her hand to Saskia. It felt like a little parcel of parchment-wrapped bones.

'Didn't anyone help you dress today?' said Miss Moxon, attacking Tilly's hair with a brush from the top of the chest.

'There's a nice young girl who looks after us all,' said Tilly. 'But she's so overworked, I tell her to leave me and help the others.'

Miss Moxon found a shawl in one of the drawers, wrapped it round Tilly's shoulders, plumped up her pillows, and persuaded her to settle back against them. She tucked a blanket round her legs, and then reached into

her holdall. She produced first a bunch of primroses which she arranged in a glass taken from the bathroom. Next she took out her thermos, and poured chicken soup into a mug. She put it firmly into Tilly's hands.

'Talk to her while she drinks it,' Miss Moxon commanded Saskia. 'It'll take her mind off this place.'

Saskia sat on the side of the bed, and launched into a description of what they were doing at Gilead. While she did so Miss Moxon delved in the chest of drawers, and with much tut-tutting extracted a large pile of dirty washing which she proceeded to stow in the hold-all. Tilly finished the soup surprisingly quickly. She looked livelier already, and her eyes were alert and interested as she questioned Saskia.

Miss Moxon came to talk to her as well, but so much unexpected company soon became more than Tilly could handle. After only twenty minutes' conversation her head started to nod, her eyes closed, and she fell asleep in mid-sentence. Her mouth dropped open, and she began to snore gently.

'Poor Tilly. She hasn't much staying power these days, but she'll feel better when she wakes,' said Miss Moxon.

She rearranged Tilly's shawl, and briskly zipped up the hold-all.

'I'll see her again tomorrow when I bring back her clean laundry. Short, frequent visits suit her best, and I know you have plenty to do at home.'

Leaving the corridor for the outer hall was like going through an air lock. Mercifully escaping the attentions of the matron, they let themselves out into the quiet street, where the spring sunshine was already coaxing chestnuts into leaf. They began to walk back towards Gilead.

'Why doesn't Tilly leave?' asked Saskia, taking deep breaths of the cool, clear air. 'Surely she doesn't have to put up with those conditions.'

'She's signed a contract undertaking to stay. I've been to a solicitor about it, but it's so carefully worded that it's impossible to break. I was abroad when it happened. When I got back she'd had a fall and a short spell in hospital. The matron goes round all the geriatric wards, drumming up custom when the patients are at their lowest. She only works on the ones who have no relatives to look after their interests. She carried Tilly off for a visit to the home, and took her round a palatial suite of show rooms. Tilly was dazzled, of course. Matron plied her with sherry and sympathy, got her completely befuddled, and persuaded her to sign the consent forms.'

'But don't doctors ever visit?'

'Of course, but somehow the home always gets to know well in advance, so the patients and the rooms can be spruced up for their visits. The same applies to the welfare inspectors. I shudder to think what goes on in the wards for the really infirm patients. I've never been allowed in there.'

'And presumably the same thing would happen next door to Gilead,' said Saskia slowly.

'Undoubtedly,' said Miss Moxon. 'I don't see how his formula can fail. There's a never-ending supply of confused old people alone in the world who can't cope on their own any more. It's especially unfair that Tilly should have been caught this way. She looked after her parents for years. I'd love to make an enormous fuss about it, but I don't have the financial resources to challenge the contract in court, and I'm sure Tilly would be victimised while the case was decided.'

Miss Moxon left Saskia at the front gate of Gilead, and walked away still with no slackening of pace towards her flat in the Paragon. Saskia had visited her recently for lunch, and knew she'd shortly be sitting in her bow window reading the *Church Times* and eating samosas

and onion bhajis, with a pot of tea strong enough to revitalise an army.

Saskia went up to her bedroom. It seemed as if the smell of the home still clung to her, and she wanted to change her clothes. The contrast between Tilly's coffin-like room and her own spacious surroundings disturbed her even more. She sat on the window seat and gazed across the garden. Some of the trees were acquiring a first flush of pale green, and pink blossom had begun to transform the almonds. She remembered how Tilly's faded eyes had nothing to refresh them, and somehow that finally made up her mind that she must continue to oppose LeValet. She'd just have to work twice as hard to make sure the film didn't suffer.

As soon as she'd made the decision she knew it was the right one, but it was quickly followed by the realisation that any relationship with Munro would now be even more unwise. Their encounters had been marked by too much intensity already. Yet against all logic she still wanted to go on seeing him.

Pondering the problem for the hundredth time, she changed and went downstairs to the kitchen. To her surprise the only occupant was Laura. She was piping a pattern on top of a cake.

'Hallo, darling,' she said. 'It's most surprising, but I find I'm rather good at this. Ben said he's never seen a non-professional take to it so quickly. I'm just helping him out while he fetches the baby from the nursery.'

She had a Liberty scarf wrapped round her hair, and was wearing one of Ben's aprons. There was a large dab of icing sugar on her cheek. The air of dishevelment suited her, made her seem younger and less brittle.

Saskia began to lay the table. Ben had already set out pitta bread and feta salad. When she'd finished she went to the fridge and offered a can of lager to Laura, who shook

her head. She took one for herself and sat down to await the others.

'Aren't you too busy setting up the boutique to bother with this?' she asked Laura. Her mother had already rented a small shop in Princess Victoria Street and begun to stock it with immensely expensive imported clothes.

'It's so tiring with no one to help,' said Laura. 'It would make such a difference if you'd spend even one day a week with me, but I know it's useless to ask. And the tax side of setting up in business is a nightmare. The mere thought of VAT makes me shiver. Ralphie always dealt with that sort of thing. One does come to depend on a man so. I never thought I'd miss him looking after me, but I do.'

She put down the piping bag and surveyed the half-finished cake.

'There – I'll let Ben do the rest. My wrist aches. He said he'd make me some canapés for the opening of the boutique.'

'But if you keep getting people to do things for you, you'll never learn to do them yourself. You shouldn't let men take over your life so much.'

'Perhaps you're right,' said her mother doubtfully, removing her scarf as she went over to the kitchen mirror and began to fluff out her hair.

Watching her, Saskia was unable to restrain a familiar surge of irritation. She'd made a great effort to get on better terms with Laura recently, and they'd seemed to be drawing closer. But now, when Saskia was already on edge with the stress of trying to make so many decisions, her mother's inability to do without male support seemed suddenly to take on an immense significance. With so much depending on Saskia, she dared not risk becoming as ineffectual as Laura. She'd lost enough self-confidence living with Adrian as it was.

When Laura went to her handbag, took out a picture

of the formerly despised and rejected Ralphie, and gazed at it with an enormous sigh, Saskia finally made up her mind to end the relationship with Munro as soon as he returned.

Chapter 12

Saskia found she was almost glad to have too much work, for it helped to take her mind off a curious feeling of emptiness when she'd made her decision. Shooting inside the house had just started, and the rooms were in turmoil. The hugely expensive lighting crew scattered equipment everywhere, cables snaking over the floors, reflectors and lights rigged in the unlikeliest places. If they hadn't been two of the best men in the business Saskia would rapidly have lost patience with them. They rattled off sexist jokes, and were unable to say anything in less than a shout. They were also far too inclined to angle for supper invitations at the end of the day.

In the evenings Saskia wrestled with the manuscript of the book, and over the next two weekends trudged the streets of Clifton with Miss Moxon persuading other residents to write letters opposing LeValet's planning application. She also invited Mike Ogden to lunch, and asked him to make a short item about the threat to Gilead for his news programme.

'You're lucky, Sass,' he said, tucking into Ben's Baked Alaska while she refilled his glass. 'I've just got a new boss, and he's decided it's time to turn the heat on LeValet. This'll fill the bill nicely.'

Not nearly so satisfactory was the information Mike had about Adrian.

'LeValet hasn't been good news for you, has he,

darling? The word is that he's pouring cash into Greer's film.'

'It doesn't bother me,' lied Saskia, knowing that whatever she said would spread all over the media world as soon as Mike got back to the Avon studios. 'We've got absolutely unique archive footage, and Carl Sandstrom's promised us an exclusive interview.'

'You jammy devils,' said Mike, looking impressed. 'Any chance of Avon getting a few minutes with him?'

'Sorry, not a hope,' said Saskia, with a wicked smile. 'But I don't mind giving you a short interview myself when it's over, just to let your viewers know what a treat they've got in store.'

The following day Saskia dispatched the lighting crew homewards after a marathon session filming since early morning in the long gallery upstairs. She'd been trying to capture the contrast between the particularly English atmosphere of the Lutyens house and Artemis's collection of African art. As a bonus, after a long wrestle with the light, Morwenna had managed to bring off some outstanding shots of the garden in its full late-April glory, framed by the open windows. The diversity of the sequences meant endless small adjustments, and Saskia was so busy that she'd had to call in a grip to push the wheeled dolly which transported the camera for tracking shots, normally one of her additional jobs. Like the lighting crew he was excellent at his work, but overly fond of telling her what other directors he'd worked for would have done.

Through the windows the westering sun was giving a final glow to the garden and gilding the fox on the stable weathervane. The gallery was quiet at last, shadows gathering stealthily in the beamed and vaulted roof and intensifying the enigmatic expressions on the faces of the Benin heads. Morwenna had gone to the dark room and

Saskia was alone. She began to collect up her shooting notes, filing them carefully on to a clipboard. Her back ached. She'd been standing all day, and she was longing for a drink with the others.

Steps sounded on the stairs. She didn't recognise the footfall, and sighed, hoping one of the lighting crew hadn't returned. But as she looked up from the clipboard she saw Munro, in a linen jacket and chinos, emerge through the arched entrance to the gallery. He was smiling and bearing down on her fast.

It was over two weeks since he'd left, and in that time she'd got no nearer working out how she was going to tell him she didn't want to see him any more. Her first instinct was to place herself as far away as possible. She threw the clipboard on to a chair and hastily retreated behind a tripod, gripping the tubular metal legs. He stopped with a puzzled expression.

'Ben let me in,' he said. 'I only got back this afternoon. I thought you might like to go out to dinner.'

'I – I can't,' she said lamely, trying without much success to marshal her thoughts.

'Ben doesn't mind. I've already asked him.'

'It's not that,' she said, retreating still further, behind the dolly this time, and for once appreciating its unwieldy bulk.

'Well, why not, then?' he said, beginning to sound impatient. His hand was already on the bar which moved the dolly along.

'I've been thinking about things ever since you went away. I'm sure it'd be best if we didn't see each other again. I've decided to file an objection to LeValet's application after all, and I'm just too busy at the moment to handle any extra commitments.'

His face assumed the wary, withdrawn expression it'd had when she first met him.

'You sound exactly like a press release,' he said, 'and about as convincing. Surely you could spare one evening? I thought we'd agreed to take things slowly in any case.'

'I don't remember agreeing to anything. I simply wanted time to think things over.'

'So that's it,' he said. 'No discussion, no nothing. Just goodbye.'

'I'm sorry, but it's better that way. Don't make it any harder, please.'

He gave the dolly an impatient shove. It rolled away and careered into the wall with a crash. He started towards her again. She instinctively moved backwards, forgetting that hanging from a frame at her back was a long length of sheet-sized gauze which had been used to diffuse the daylight. She blundered into the soft enveloping folds like a moth into a trap.

He grabbed her in a cocoon of net and kissed her, a long obstinate kiss which left her speechless. She found herself struggling still more desperately with a mixture of rage and disappointment when he abruptly let go. Shakily she disentangled herself, furious with him for not keeping to the terms they'd agreed to at their last meeting. He put his hands in his pockets, and hunched his shoulders, as if he were daring her to protest.

'That's bloody well not fair,' she said. 'Behaving like that didn't mean a thing.'

'It did to me. It proved that we still ought to give things a chance. You could at least have dinner with me.'

'There's no point,' she said, mechanically bunching up the gauze in her hand. 'I've already decided. I keep telling you I can't cope with any extra responsibility.'

'Artemis wouldn't have said that,' he replied unexpectedly.

'That's even less fair, when I'm doing it for Artemis.'

'Bullshit. Artemis wouldn't have wanted you to live like a nun for her.'

'I knew Artemis a thousand times better than you,' she flared. 'And if I did carry on seeing you, how could I be sure you wouldn't eventually try to screw up my career? I won't be possessed.'

He gripped her by the arms, almost shaking her in his exasperation.

'You don't understand anything,' he said. 'Wanting to be with someone doesn't necessarily mean possessing them.'

'It did to all the men I've known up to now. And you're already wanting me to do something against my better judgement. Anyway, how can you talk about being with anyone else when you're still missing Sabah so much?'

'How can you know what either of us can or can't do, if you don't let us find out?'

He suddenly released her. She almost fell into the gauze for a second time, but was just able to steady herself against the frame. When she looked up he was standing at the open window, staring out with one hand on the sill. The blackbird was singing his evening song in the cedar, but Munro didn't appear to hear. She said nothing, longing for him to go, longing to be alone, and for peace to return to Gilead.

'All right,' he said finally. 'If that's how you want it. You've done a good hatchet job.'

'I'll put your photos in the post tomorrow,' she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

'Sod the photos. Do what you like with them. I'm not interested in them or you any more.'

He pulled the window to with a bang that made the glass shiver in its frame, turned on his heel and left her. She heard him take the stairs two at a time and cross the hall. The front door slammed shut. There was silence at last.

Saskia had got exactly what she wanted, a clean break before too much damage was done. She thought she'd be able to put Munro out of her mind almost at once, but it didn't work out quite like that. His hurt, puzzled expression kept returning to her at the most inconvenient times. Just as she was trying to focus on a particularly tricky sequence in the film she'd wonder if she really had done the right thing, and only come to when Morwenna shouted at her for not paying attention.

A location trip to Cambridge helped a little. They filmed Artemis's old college, and managed to track down her first love, now an emeritus professor. With the bribe of a mention for his latest book on kinship systems, Morwenna and Saskia lured him to the exact spot where he'd proposed to Artemis. In a punt moored on the Backs, against a background of King's College chapel and willow trees in their flowing spring greenery, Saskia got him to talk about his relationship with Artemis. He had never married, and still seemed to be in a state of shock at losing her. His self-deprecating account of the affair, laced with mordant humour and a bitter-sweet regret, made gripping television. Even Morwenna was impressed by the result.

'I never knew I was so good,' she said, as they ran through the uncut footage back at Gilead. 'Shooting on a muddy riverbank, trying to look as if I wasn't there, with manic punters making tidal waves all around, wasn't easy. Even his stuffy old book looks great, lying casually like that on the cushions beside him.'

Mike Ogden duly made his news item, though Saskia only let him film the outside of Gilead. There were scores of calls to Avon Television afterwards, pledging support. Saskia and Morwenna concocted a press handout and got a mention in several of the national papers. Ben and Miss Moxon organised shifts of protesters to stand outside the site waving placards with the words 'Hands off our city's heritage'.

'LeValet must be rattled by now,' said Ben, as they were sitting round the breakfast table at the start of another gruelling day.

He was fondly spooning his own version of baby muesli into Jules's mouth, while Freddy with a pack of crayons worked on a complicated lay-out for annuals in the plat.

'The planning committee sits next week, doesn't it?' he went on. 'I'm sure they'll throw the application out after so much fuss, and even if LeValet appeals I really do think there's a good chance he won't win this time.'

'I'll be glad when it's over,' said Saskia.

She was sitting in the Windsor chair while she finished a last cup of coffee. Svengali had just devoured a plate of chicken scraps after a night's prowl, and jumped heavily into her lap. He disposed his silky grey body across her thighs, tucked his nose into the crook of her elbow, and began to purr thunderously. His topaz eyes gradually closed.

Saskia picked up the morning's mail which she'd delayed inspecting until she felt stronger. It usually consisted of bills demanding immediate payment, and letters from fans of Artemis and Gertrude Jekyll pleading to see Gilead. They had been forced to lay on occasional conducted tours, and vetting visitors took up more time, for Saskia was terrified of letting in one of Adrian's spies inadvertently.

She came to a letter at the bottom of the pile, in a

pale blue linen-weave envelope with a large crimson crest embossed on the back. Saskia slit it open with a knife, idly thinking that it must be from some aristocratic gardening expert.

There was an even larger crest at the head of the letter inside. The writing, in royal blue ink, heavily looped and flourished, concluded with a signature sprawled across the page. It was LeValet's. Her indignation as she began to read was rapidly replaced by disbelief.

'What is it?' said Morwenna, who sat with her feet propped on the Esse, waiting for Jules to go off to be changed so that she could smoke the first cigarette of the day. It was one of her few concessions to his presence. 'It must be a letter from Adrian for you to look like that.'

'Even worse,' said Saskia slowly. 'It's from LeValet. He'd like to talk things over. He says he's worried about the amount of local opposition there's been to his plans, and that it's the last thing he wants. He apologises – LeValet actually apologises – for his so-called assistant's behaviour when we last met, says he didn't mean to upset me, and feels sure we can settle the matter amicably to the satisfaction of us both. Can you believe it?'

'I told you so. He's giving way,' said Ben. 'We have rattled him.'

'Huh, there's bound to be a catch with LeValet,' said Freddy.

'There doesn't seem to be, on the face of it,' said Saskia, skimming through the letter again. 'He's asked me to meet him tomorrow evening at eight at The China Clipper for a full and frank discussion, as he puts it. He says he'll be alone, and I can turn up or not, as I wish.'

'That's the floating restaurant moored in St Augustine's Reach,' said Ben.

'It's always crammed with yuppies,' said Freddy. 'I tried a spot of begging there once, but I didn't get much.'

'The ambience is great, and the food's terrific too,' said Ben. 'You'd probably enjoy that if nothing else.'

'I certainly wouldn't enjoy an evening spent with LeValet,' said Saskia. 'He can send me his proposals in writing if he really means what he says.'

'But that'd just make sure it dragged out beyond the committee stage,' said Morwenna thoughtfully, 'and you're having to waste far too much time on this business as it is. Don't forget we've got Sandstrom coming to Gilead soon, and you don't want to have to cope with an appeal as well.'

'But a whole evening spent with LeValet!' said Saskia. 'I can't bear the man. He's so phoney. More than that, he scares me now.'

'Me too. He's such a weirdo,' said Freddy. 'No wonder you never hear of a Mrs LeValet.'

'Stop being so negative, both of you,' said Morwenna impatiently. 'It doesn't have to take the whole evening, Sass. You can call all the shots if he's so eager. Tell him when you get there that you can only spare the time for a quick drink. Nothing could possibly go wrong in such a public setting, and if you take the Beetle you can make a quick getaway whenever you want. It's a pity I can't go with you, but I've got a visit to London all fixed up.'

Saskia forced herself to think again about LeValet's proposition. Unfortunately it looked as though Morwenna was right. The work was piling up inexorably the further they progressed with the film, and some days she felt overwhelmed by it. She'd be a fool not to take seriously any prospect, however uncertain, of defusing his threat.

'All right,' she said. 'I don't like it, but I'll give him one last chance.'

Saskia parked the Beetle as near as possible to The China Clipper, in a bay at the edge of the cobbled quay. The

newly emerged leaves on the plane trees were a strange purpley-green under the dockside lights. She noticed that one of the Beetle's tyres looked slightly flat, but she felt too keyed up to investigate and determinedly dismissed it from her mind.

It was a calm night. A full moon had just risen above the darkened warehouses on the far side of the floating dock, and cast a rippled path of silver across the water. The boat was dressed overall with flags and fairy lights, and diners were visible through the long low windows which had replaced the portholes. Saskia was wearing a wide-necked dress of blackberry-coloured jersey with long sleeves and a flowing skirt. It was still early May, and she'd wrapped Artemis's scarlet shawl round her shoulders for warmth.

She negotiated the gang plank, already feeling uncertain and nervous, and was escorted by a waiter down a wrought-iron companionway into the dining room. It was packed, but LeValet rose to greet her at a table which was by far the best, overlooking the full expanse of the harbour from the stern. He was dressed in a dark blue dinner jacket with wide velvet revers which gave him the look of a player in a fifties musical. By his side was a bottle of champagne wedged in a bucket of ice, and at her place setting a corsage of orchids.

She sat down, ignoring the flowers, hands firmly clasped on her purse. He hauled up the champagne, which was already open.

'Please don't look so anxious,' he said. 'I can assure you there's no one with me, not even my telephone.'

He smiled broadly at his own joke.

'And I'm delighted you felt able to join me,' he went on. 'Now I can apologise properly for my assistant's behaviour. May I give you some champagne to celebrate the beginning of a new understanding between us?'

'There's nothing to celebrate yet,' she said brusquely, 'and I'll stick to water. Shall we come straight to the point? What exactly is this new proposal of yours?'

A waiter handed her a menu. She shook her head determinedly.

'I don't want a meal. I haven't the time.'

'Of course,' said LeValet. 'I should have remembered what a very busy young lady you are. But I've already ordered an hors d'oeuvre, so please at least have a little smoked salmon while we talk. I promise I won't keep you long.'

He nodded to the waiter before she had a chance to protest.

'It troubles me that my proposed development should still cause you so much concern,' he said. 'It makes me wonder if you've studied my plans in any detail.'

'Of course I have, at the council offices. I know all about the eyesore you intend to build next to Gilead.'

'But that's where you're so wrong. It's not going to be the same. Believe me, I've taken very much to heart all these recent criticisms. I've had revised plans drawn up. I think you'd change your mind if you saw them.'

'I doubt it. I've seen your Clifton Happy Valley home.'

'I'm willing to make concessions if you are,' he said. 'Surely it'd be worth it for both of us?'

The waiter had placed in front of them plates of smoked salmon with lemon slices and triangles of brown bread and butter. She watched, feeling slightly queasy, as a roll of fish disappeared into his moist pink mouth. He never took his eyes off her as he chewed. The uneasy sensation was increased when she looked away out of the window and saw the horizon shift with the faint movement of the boat.

'Well, where are these plans?' she said. 'You'd better show me.'

He paused to forage around a back molar with a toothpick. Saskia abandoned the attempt to eat her own food.

'They're not just plans,' he said. 'I've had a 3-D layout done by a top model-maker, all perfectly to scale. Naturally I couldn't bring it with me. You'd need to come to my house to see it and get the full effect.'

'You don't really expect me to agree after what happened the other day?' she said, her voice rising indignantly. 'I'm not a complete fool. If you haven't got the plans here, there's nothing more to say.'

She began to push back her chair, but as she put down her table napkin he placed his hand over hers.

'Please, just listen for a moment longer. I'm so convinced you'll approve of the new designs that I promise to drop the project altogether if you still object.'

She stared at him, and slowly sat down again. It seemed too good to be true, and yet if he really meant what he said, then she had nothing to lose.

'Think about it,' he said. 'I don't like problems any more than you. And think how relieved your dear mother would be. She's so easily upset.'

Saskia was very near agreeing to go. The temptation was huge, to see the model,which was bound to be hideous, to object instantly to it, and to return to Gilead triumphant. But something about the way he'd referred to Laura, and something about the feel of his skin resting so clammily and intimately on hers, decided her against it.

'No,' she said abruptly. 'It'll have to take its chance with the planning committee. That's my final word.'

She got to her feet, and he hastily pushed back his chair, looking disconcerted at last.

'Wait! You must wait!' he called after her as she made for the companionway. She heard him hissing at the waiter to send him the bill, and then he caught up with her at the

foot of the steps. 'You must reconsider. This is far too big a decision to make lightly.'

She ignored him, and rushed on to the deck. He caught up again at the head of the gangplank. Saskia looked towards the comforting outline of the Beetle, and her knees sagged. Coming towards them across the cobblestones, wearing a tie for the first time since she'd met him at The Watershed, was Munro. He was arm in arm with a tall, strikingly beautiful black woman in African dress, and they were laughing.

He looked up, saw her with LeValet, and his face changed. He began to climb the gangplank behind the woman, staring up at Saskia. Just as they were all about to meet, a breathless headwaiter arrived summoning LeValet to the phone to take an urgent call from Japan.

He stood irresolutely for a few seconds, then plunged back down the companionway, calling at her again to wait. She flattened herself into the shadows, waiting for Munro and his companion to go past her into the dining room so that she could escape. She took a deep breath of the rank river air to steady herself.

Munro didn't, as she'd expected, ignore her. He stopped and said something to his companion, who smiled at him and went on ahead. He loomed over Saskia.

'What the hell do you think you're doing with LeValet?' he demanded. 'How could you be such an idiot? Didn't you learn anything last time?'

'What's it got to do with you? You said you weren't interested in me any more, so prove it.'

'You've been dining with him, haven't you? Yet you wouldn't have dinner with me. You've an odd sense of priorities.'

'I didn't even have a drink with LeValet. It was a business meeting. Does that satisfy you?'

She heard him laugh incredulously. A freshening wind

was blowing across the water, and she wrapped the scarf more closely round herself.

'It was,' she said. 'We were discussing his plans for the new Happy Valley home. He's got a full scale model at his house, and he asked me to go and see it.'

'See his etchings, more like,' said Munro. 'How naive can you get?'

'For Christ's sake, this is the twentieth century, you know. Anyway, he promised that if I still didn't like his plans he'd drop the project completely, and I think for once he meant it.'

'Don't you understand he'll change his tune the minute you get there? LeValet's a borderline psychotic, not some misguided but basically OK person who can be swayed by reason, as you seem to think.'

More diners were coming up the gangplank and staring curiously at them. By now Saskia was almost speechless with anger. To make things worse she was struggling with unexpected resentment that he should have taken someone else out so soon. Even more startling, she'd discovered she was jealous of the African woman. Though she'd fully intended not to go with LeValet, she was overcome by an irresistible impulse to teach Munro a lesson.

'So you believe I can't deal with one middle-aged man suffering from the male menopause? He's given the minder the night off, and I clearly remember you said it's all bluff and bullying from LeValet himself. Of course I'm going to his house. There's too much at stake not to.'

He gave her a long scornful look.

'I clearly remember respecting your judgement at one time, but not any more. You're letting emotion make up your mind. Why should I waste any more time trying to get you to see sense? I've better things to do.'

He turned abruptly and went down into the warmth and light, leaving Saskia alone on the open deck, shivering now more with rage than cold. She braced herself as LeValet re-emerged from the dining room. A delighted smile spread over his face when he saw her still standing there.

'My dear Saskia, I'm so pleased you didn't leave after all. I hope this means you've agreed to my proposal?'

'It means I'll come to your house, in my own car, just briefly to look at the new plans, and nothing else. But don't expect me to change my mind,' she said shortly.

'I shan't pressurise you in any way, I promise. You're free to do exactly as you wish.'

As she followed his car in the Beetle she tried to subdue a growing feeling that Munro was right and she was about to do something very stupid indeed. But she was so far committed now that there was nothing to do except brazen things out. Five minutes later LeValet's limousine turned slowly into the grounds of a grey stone mansion on The Promenade. The drive was spread with coloured gravel which glittered in the light of fake Victorian gas lamps. She parked the Beetle by the front door as LeValet emerged from his limousine.

He ushered her into the house. It was a solid, early-Victorian edifice of the kind built by wealthy Bristol merchants at the height of the Empire, but LeValet had added a huge portico worthy of a Mississippi plantation, with marble columns and a sweeping flight of balustraded steps.

The hall was a grander edition of the one at the Happy Valley home. On the wall hung another picture of LeValet, this time in full highland evening dress, posturing against the background of a glaringly nouveau Balmoral.

He gestured towards it nonchalantly. 'I had that done at my place near Perth,' he said.

A Filipino maid scuttled forward and took Saskia's shawl, then hurried ahead of LeValet to throw open an inner door. They passed through a vast drawing room full of sofas with burgeoning satin cushions. Huge vases of silk flowers stood at the windows. The maid opened double doors into a long library.

'I think of this as my powerhouse,' said LeValet, 'much more so than my office. This is where my most creative work takes place.'

The windows were curtained with swagged mushroom satin, held in place with gold cords. They walked across cream-coloured carpet thick as a poodle's coat. Two standard lamps shaded with wine-coloured silk cast the sort of pink glow found in up-market hairdressing salons. At first Saskia was astounded by the books lining the walls, rows and rows of what appeared to be leatherbound first editions. She thought she'd come on something genuine at last. But when she looked more closely she saw they were simply strips of leather embossed like the spines of books, and stuck to a wooden base resembling shelves.

LeValet gave a reproduction seventeenth-century globe a proprietary spin. The maid was still standing there, and he waved her away irritably.

'I'll ring if I need you, Concepcion.'

A huge gas fire with artificial logs blazed in the hearth. The room was stifling, and already Saskia longed to escape. LeValet opened a cocktail cabinet disguised as a rococo commode. Her throat was dry, but she again resolutely declined his offer of a drink. He poured himself a glass of brandy.

'I'd like to see the plans,' she said.

She followed him to a round mahogany table in one of the window bays. He turned a handle with another

flourish, and the top slid smoothly apart to reveal a recessed model of the new Happy Valley home. It bore the name of a prestigious firm of London architects, and was nothing like the plan she'd seen in the council office. The new elevation was restrained, elegant, in perfect harmony with the surrounding buildings, and had hardly any windows on the side of the boundary with Gilead.

She scanned it suspiciously.

'I suppose it's not too bad,' she said, 'but what about the inside?'

'Easily altered too,' he said.

He lifted off the roof. The individual rooms were spacious and thoughtfully furnished, there was a garden designed especially for wheel chairs, an indoor swimming pool, and a physiotherapy area. It was a geriatric's dream.

'If I did decide not to object, you'd have to give me a watertight legal undertaking that you'd use the revised plans,' she said, after she'd examined it minutely.

'Naturally,' he said. 'It'd all be done just as you wish.'

Still she hesitated, trying to read the expression in his eyes, which were as unfathomable as ever.

'Surely you must realise by now that I really do appreciate beautiful things,' he said. 'I've several special collections of art from between the wars. I'm particularly fond of that period. Won't you come and see?'

He gestured towards a tall cupboard in a deeply recessed alcove at the far end of the room. She followed him unwillingly, thinking she was probably about to be confronted by an array of toby jugs.

Away from the standard lamps the room was in semi-darkness, but as he unlocked the heavy mahogany door of the cupboard a light flicked on inside. The interior was backed with purple velvet and lined with shelves

containing a collection of figurines in porcelain and ivory and glass, genuine at last, but grotesquely erotic. They were all of naked women, all in attitudes of lascivious self-display: arching backwards, caressing themselves, lying splay-legged. Some were openly obscene. The cupboard was like a lighted booth in a brothel.

Saskia tore her eyes away and looked frantically for some way of escape, but she was hemmed in by LeValet. He was absorbed in an ivory netsuke of a girl being licked by a dog, turning it this way and that in his stubby hands. He put it down reluctantly, and picked up a crystal figurine slightly more restrained than the rest, a nymph arched backwards over a waterfall, her hair blending with the cascade of water. He ran his thumb slowly down the length of the naked body, and then looked up at Saskia. His eyes were avid.

'Yes, I love beautiful things,' he said. 'If only I'd had a daughter like you.' He put out a hand and stroked her hair. She froze, terrified now.

'Don't,' she said in a strangled gasp.

He didn't seem to hear. He ran his hand from her hair to her throat. His skin dragged damply against hers. She was immobile with fear. She could hear his hurried breathing, and feel the warmth of his body even in the suffocating room. He lowered his head, and she thought for one sickening moment that he was going to kiss her. But instead she felt his tongue slowly trace a slug-like path from her neck to her shoulder.

The remark about being his daughter made the action even more loathsome. She was rooted to the spot with horror, but somehow, through the waves of panic, she dredged up the memory of a self-defence class Morwenna had chivvied her into long ago. She did what she'd never thought she could do – rammed her knee into his groin and thrust him away with all her strength.

He doubled up, groaning. She fled past him through the drawing room and into the hall. She had just enough wit left to grab her shawl, which lay neatly folded on a chair, and then she was out in the drive, panting with terror, still hardly able to believe what had happened.

She leapt into the car and drove with a great crashing of gears on to the road, not caring where she went as long as it was away from LeValet. She ground towards the main road like a drag racer, and crossed it on to Clifton Down, then realised that she was still in second gear and had forgotten to put her lights on. Even worse, the suspect tyre was beginning to feel ominously bumpy.

She forced herself to pull up. She felt sick, and her neck seemed to burn, as if it were smeared with some poisonous slime. She found a tissue and rubbed furiously at it. Her hands were shaking so much she could hardly wind down the window, but eventually she got it open and took huge gulps of air.

She began to feel slightly better. She sat for some time running and re-running the events of the evening in her mind, and raging at her own stupidity. She contemplated going to the police, then decided against it. She had no witnesses, she hadn't been marked in any way, and no doubt LeValet would terrorise the maid into saying she'd been present the whole time and nothing had happened. She tried to think rationally, reminding herself again that he'd hardly touched her. It was just the nature of the touch she couldn't forget. The only good moment was when she thrust her knee into his groin.

She began to feel cold. It had been a glorious day, but there was no cloud cover to retain its warmth. The moon was high in a clear sky, and when she peered at her watch she found she'd been sitting there for fifteen minutes. If she didn't go home soon the others would start to worry. She put the headlights on, and slowly began to drive in a

strange detached state away from the downs, deliberately taking a roundabout route well away from LeValet's house until, halfway home, the tyre deflated completely.

She couldn't face changing the wheel. Resigned, she locked the car and started to walk the rest of the way, keeping as much as possible to the shadows. Her legs still felt unsteady, and she kept expecting to see LeValet's limousine come cruising after her. After about twenty minutes she found herself turning into the road which ran along the orangery wall. At the far end she heard heavy running footsteps, but after a moment's panic realised thankfully that they were going in the opposite direction. She'd almost passed the side gate before she saw something was wrong. She stopped, and went back to have another look. It was partly open, swinging slightly, the lock prised away and the wood splintered round it.

She rushed through the gate, then stopped. Moonlight flooded the garden, and in front of the orangery the ground seemed to be covered in a heavy frost. She went forward unbelievingly and saw the door torn off its hinges and jagged, gaping holes where the windows should have been. They were smashed, and the pieces ground to tiny fragments. The camellias and most of the smaller plants were overturned, their stems broken, earth everywhere. Miss Moxon had been bringing on some pots of white lilies and they too were trampled into the ground.

Saskia picked up a flower lying crushed on the threshhold, thinking weakly that LeValet had wasted no time in getting his revenge. The petals were covered with splashes of blood. At first she thought it came from one of the vandals, and then she remembered with sudden shocking clarity that Svengali often chased mice in the orangery at night.

Now she could see a trail of crimson drops leading from the door out into the courtyard. Once more breathless

with fear, she followed it and found Sven, his golden eyes closed, his fur draggled with blood, lying limply at the foot of the walnut tree. She fell on her knees by his side, but he was already dead.

Chapter 13

Saskia lifted Sven and cradled him in her arms. His body was cooling fast. The back of his skull had been crushed by a boot, and a darker red seeped slowly into the scarlet of her shawl. She laid her cheek against his fur, but all the springy warmth had gone. An agonising surge of grief and resentment at such senseless brutality welled up inside her. Savagely she forced herself to suppress it, feeling as she had after her father's death that she would somehow be irrevocably overwhelmed.

Another car drew up outside and she wondered in a daze if LeValet had tracked her down. She hardly cared any more. She shut her eyes, and heard brisk steps and a startled voice saying, 'Christ! What's happened here?'

Her body seemed to have gone into slow motion, but when she eventually looked up she saw Munro standing in the gateway, staring at the havoc in the orangery. He came slowly to her side and put out his hand to stroke Sven's fur.

'Who did this? LeValet?' he asked.

'I made him angry,' she answered dully. 'He must have sent his men here as soon as I left his house.'

'But are *you* all right?'

'Of course – you can see I am. But Sven . . .' She couldn't go on. Her voice seemed to be lost in her throat.

He took her by the shoulders and steered her towards the beechwood seat. She sat down numbly, still clutching

Sven, as if she could warm him into life. She couldn't bear to let him go. He'd been with her for so long, from when she'd first found him wandering on unsteady kitten's legs, half-drowned, along a bank of the Cam. He'd been part of her growing up.

Munro sat down beside her. He took off his jacket and put it round her shoulders.

'You'll get blood on it,' she said.

'I've known worse,' he answered.

The moon was riding high in the branches of the walnut tree, and frogs croaked distantly in one of the ponds. The air had become even colder. The light silvering the garden, like a backdrop to a ballet, intensified her feeling of unreality. If she didn't look down she could almost believe nothing had happened. Some of the warmth from Munro's jacket began to transfer itself to her. She remembered he was supposed to be with his girlfriend.

'What are you doing here?' she asked. Her voice hardly seemed to belong to her.

'Being inconsistent, luckily. I was worried about you. I took Anna back to her hotel, and went over to LeValet's house. I knew you had your car with you – I'd seen it at the dockside. It wasn't in his drive, so I came to Gilead to check that you'd got home safely.'

She sighed. The events of the early evening seemed remote. Svengali's body was growing heavy, and she shifted it in her arms.

'Why don't you let me put him on the ground for a moment?' said Munro.

He took Sven from her and laid him gently at her feet. The body looked small and empty now. Saskia pulled her shawl from under the jacket and spread it over him.

Munro took her hand.

'Come into the house,' he said. 'I'll phone the police.'

'No, not the police!' she said. The prospect of them

questioning her, asking her where she'd been that evening, examining Sven's body, maybe even taking it away, was unendurable. 'There's nothing they can do. We can't prove it was LeValet's men. And I don't want to have to tell them what happened at his house. I couldn't bear it.'

His hand tightened on hers.

'But you said you were all right. What did he do?'

Haltingly she told him the story, thinking how pathetic it seemed. She hadn't meant to tell anyone about the way LeValet had touched her, but she found herself telling Munro. Her voice choked over the description.

'The bastard!' he said harshly. 'I should have nailed that man long ago. So what happened next?'

'I kneed him,' she said.

He stared at her, then slowly smiled as if he was suddenly hugely relieved.

'That wouldn't have improved his temper,' he said. 'At least he should steer clear of another meeting.'

'I hope so, but I don't think it's likely,' she said, shivering.

'Come inside,' he said again. 'You can tell me the rest in the warm.'

'I've told you, I don't want to go inside yet,' she said. She felt immensely weary. Having to go over everything again for the others would in a different way be just as bad as telling the police. She looked down at the body at her feet.

'I want to bury Sven,' she said.

'Now?' he asked, looking slightly taken aback. 'Wouldn't it be better in the morning?'

'No, now,' she said. She could hear her voice rising, but she couldn't stop it. 'I must get it over. I don't want to wake up to this.'

He was silent for a moment or two, watching her.

'All right,' he said finally. 'It's some time since I dug a grave, but tell me where I can find a spade.'

'Oh God,' she said, suddenly remembering. 'Sabah. You didn't – you didn't . . .'

'No, not Sabah, just someone who worked with me in Angola. Let's do it quickly, though. Is there a spade in the shed?'

She nodded. He fetched it and came back to her.

'Under the tree?' he said.

She nodded again. He started to dig in the freshly turned flower-bed in the centre of the orangery courtyard. She remembered that Freddy had been going to plant nasturtiums there. The steel spade rang rhythmically in the earth and stones, striking deeper and deeper. She felt hypnotised by the sound. A poem she'd learned at school kept coming into her head. Munro stopped to rest for a moment. The garden was completely silent. Even the frogs were quiet. Without thinking she said the first line of the poem into the empty air.

' "Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note. . ."'

He looked up.

'"The Burial of Sir John Moore at Corunna",' he said.

He smiled at her, then returned to his task. Soon the grave was ready. She lapped the Somali shawl around Svengali's body, laid her cheek against him for the last time, and placed him tenderly in the earth. As Munro filled in the grave and she saw the scarlet of the familiar shawl gradually disappear it felt almost as if Artemis was being buried too. She remembered seeing one uncrushed lily, and fetched it and placed it on top of the mound.

She couldn't think of anything to say. She looked at Munro.

'I wish I could remember some more of the poem,' she said.

He propped the spade against the tree and came to her side, taking her hand again and saying one of the verses in a quiet voice:

'"No useless coffin enclosed his breast,
Not in sheet nor in shroud we wound him,
But he lay like a warrior taking his rest
With his martial cloak around him."'

The words seemed to unblock a log-jam of emotion. She burst into a rush of uncontrollable weeping. She could do nothing except stand there while everything about her shifted and wavered through a watery haze, and she felt as if she was about to dissolve in her own tears.

He hesitated, and then his arms went round her. She leaned despairingly against him, resting her forehead on his chest. He seemed to be her final link with reality. After a very long time, something in his calm stillness at last began to get through to her, and the weeping began to slacken a little. His shirt, which was damp with tears, smelt slightly and not unpleasingly of sweat. As the crying abated still more she remembered something which had surprised her. She looked up at him, trying to control herself, wiping her face awkwardly with her hands.

'I never thought you'd like poetry,' she said in a shaky voice.

'What did you think I'd like? An exclusive diet of Hemingway and Mailer?'

His face was concerned, but his voice was light, and she guessed he was keeping it deliberately so in order not to become involved again. With a huge effort she made a feeble attempt at a joke.

'I'm sorry,' she said, trying to produce a smile as well. 'I didn't mean to stereo-type you as well as drown you.'

'That's better,' he said, looking intensely relieved again. He carefully released her. 'And you really should go inside now. It's far too cold out here.'

'No,' she said, panicking. 'Not yet. Not so soon.'

He hunched his shoulders. 'You can't stay in the garden

all night. The only other alternative's to come home with me, and I'm sure you don't want that.'

She felt so exhausted that it was difficult to know what she wanted, except that she couldn't deal with having to respond to the sympathy she knew Ben and Freddy would shower on her. She knew he'd only said it to encourage her to go indoors, but now she wanted to believe he'd meant it. As she stood looking at the debris the farm seemed a haven of ordinariness and peace. There was bound to be some quiet room where she could just sleep and sleep undisturbed till morning. Then perhaps she'd be able to cope with the aftermath of the night. She must be able to face whatever LeValet might do next.

'Yes, I'd like to go to the farm,' she said.

Munro's face was expressionless.

'Are you sure?' he asked.

She nodded. He put away the spade, wedged the gate shut, and steered her towards the Citroën. She looked up at him as she got in. His expression was still blank. He was probably annoyed, but she was past caring.

'I'll ring Ben when we get back,' he said, as he started the engine.

He leaned into the back seat, felt for a sweater, and pulled it over his head. She suddenly remembered something he'd once said about still getting over malaria, and realised guiltily how chilled he must have become.

'I'm so sorry,' she said. 'I didn't mean to make you cold as well as dig Sven's grave.'

To her horror she found herself beginning to cry again, as though she had tears left which she'd stored up for years. She wept all through the suburbs, and all along the motorway, gulping into a tattered duster which she found in the glove compartment, and he said absolutely nothing. But when they finally turned off into the countryside on the main Gloucester road, he turned and looked at her.

'That's enough now,' he said, and put one arm round her.

To her surprise she suddenly stopped. She felt completely limp, as if she'd been caught up in a giant centrifuge. The road was almost deserted and the car was going extremely fast.

'Let's hope the traffic police aren't out tonight,' he said.

She rested her head on his shoulder, closed her eyes just for a moment before she had to start coping again, and slept.

Munro eased his arm away, trying not to disturb her. The events of the evening had already made him do far too many things against his better judgement and driving with only one arm just added to them needlessly.

He glanced down at her. Her face was streaked with tears and her eyelids were swollen, but she still looked desirable. Taking her to the farm probably wasn't a good idea at all, but he decided to worry about that when he got there. She'd had one hell of an evening, and he suspected now that if he hadn't taken such a tough line with her at the boat she might well have listened to him and not gone with LeValet.

She didn't wake until they arrived outside the farm, and the dog began to bark. He lolloped round their legs wagging his tail as Munro switched on the kitchen lights. The room was warm, and the old malarial ache in his bones, which the car heater hadn't entirely dispersed, began to fade.

Saskia sat down by the Aga, laying her head back against the chair, and the dog put his muzzle on her knee. She stretched out her legs to the warmth, kicking off her high-heeled shoes. She was wearing sheer black stockings, and her feet were narrow and high-arched.

Munro brought her a glass of brandy, and watched her as she drank.

'Did you eat with Le Valet?' he asked.

'No,' she replied. 'I couldn't.'

He saw her shudder and touch her neck. He startled himself with the thought that if LeValet had been in the room with them now he'd have flattened him into the ground.

'Why don't you have a bath?' he said, trying to sound matter-of-fact. 'I'll fix you some soup while you're upstairs. Mrs Gadge, my help, usually leaves me far too much. The bathroom's on the right at the top of the stairs, and you'll find some towels in the cupboard.'

She hesitated, then made an obvious effort to match his casual tone.

'All right, if you're sure. Thanks.'

'Good. I'll ring Ben as well, and tell him what's happened.'

Saskia came downstairs twenty minutes later. The old-fashioned bath had been as big as a watering trough, with lime stains on the enamel beneath the brass taps, and over it was an ancient shower with a six-inch head which delivered a stinging burst of hot water. When she'd dried herself she couldn't bring herself to put on her clothes again. They reminded her too vividly of the evening's events. There was a white towelling bath-robe hanging on the back of the door, and she put it on. It was far too large, and by the time she'd wrapped herself in it, with the front lapped tightly across, and the belt tied in a double knot, she was clothed as decorously as a Carmelite nun.

'I've spoken to Ben,' Munro said, ladling some soup into a bowl. 'I told him not to call the police.'

'Thank you,' said Saskia. She didn't ask what Ben had

said. Just for tonight she'd decided not think any more about what had happened at Gilead.

Munro had switched off the main light, and the table, with fruit piled on a plate in the centre, was lit by a lamp. As well as the soup there was a cottage loaf, and a slab of butter in a dish with a brown cow on the lid. The soup was thick with pearl barley and tender chunks of lamb. He didn't talk while she ate, but sat by the Aga with a glass of whisky. The voice of Ella Fitzgerald swung softly across to them from the CD player. The atmosphere in the room was reassuringly normal, and yet at the same time subtly charged with something Saskia couldn't quite place, something that hadn't been there on her last visit.

She wanted to make it clear to him that she was in command of herself again, but wasn't sure how to begin. She watched him covertly over the soup. He seemed almost unaware of her presence as he listened to the music. His hand on the glass was compact and capable, unadorned in any way except for an old Rolex on a leather strap round his wrist. She remembered Adrian's gold and onyx ring, and his Cartier bracelet watch.

She finished the soup and took a nectarine. She cut it in half, offering him a piece. He shook his head.

'I had a meal at The China Clipper. After Africa I still can't quite get used to the vast amounts of food available here.'

'The woman you were with,' Saskia said hesitantly. 'She was very beautiful.'

'Yes,' he said. 'Anna. She's from Harar.'

'Have you known her long?' Saskia asked.

She knew it shouldn't concern her, she knew this was no way to be coolly redistancing herself from him, but she couldn't stop the question.

'Yes,' he said, again not elaborating. He looked up from his glass and his eyes were amused.

She finished the nectarine and got to her feet. There was no point in trying to prop up the conversation if neither of them was in the mood for talking, and she'd begun to feel drowsy.

'I'd better go to bed,' she said.

'Right,' he answered. 'I'll show you the guest room, such as it is. My mother used it last. She'd be fussing about damp sheets if she were here. I meant to get an electric blanket, but I didn't think I'd have another visitor so soon.'

She followed him up the stairs. He went past the bathroom, and across the landing. There were several doors and passages leading off it. The house seemed to ramble endlessly in all directions.

'Where's your room?' she asked, beginning to feel disoriented among so many sludge-coloured doors all looking exactly the same.

'In here.' He pushed open one of them. 'Do you want to have a look?'

He didn't bother to turn on the light, for the moon, now some way down the sky, was shining directly into the room. It contained a vast mahogany wardrobe crowned with a carved pediment, and an even larger brass bed which sagged in the middle like a hammock, and had several curlicues missing from the end rail. It was neatly made up with blankets and a chintz eiderdown.

The floor had a distinct slant, like the deck of a ship, and was covered with a shabby carpet, torn in several places. Saskia went over to the window, set in a deep embrasure in the wall. It looked out towards the river, now a mirror brimming with light. To one side of the window was a chest of drawers, with a pair of binoculars and a small china tray containing some drawing pins on top. That was all, except for a photo of Munro and Sabah together. Saskia picked it up and studied it.

'I'm glad you've found someone else,' she said, surprised to find she really meant it. He'd been endlessly good to her that evening.

He took it from her and put it back face downwards.

'It's like you to say that,' he answered, taking her in his arms. 'So am I. And I know my mother wouldn't like me to let you sleep in damp sheets.'

Suddenly all the events of the last few hours seemed to click into place, like the final moves on a Rubik's cube, as if everything had been going towards this end all the time, as if the profound attraction she'd felt before in the garden at Gilead had simply been asleep, and now had woken for good.

He kissed her very tentatively, tracing her lips with his tongue.

'Mm,' he said. 'You taste like summer.'

'But – Anna?' she said, feeling like a swimmer about to lose sight of land. 'You can't do this.'

'Can't I?' he said, kissing her again. 'Anna's the director of an aid charity. That was purely a business meeting.'

'Purely?' she said, in a last useless attempt to restore some sanity to the situation.

'Purely.'

His lips moved to her eyes, back to her mouth, then travelled down her throat to the V of the bathrobe. She put her hand in his hair. It was thick and springy between her fingers. His hand was on the tie of the robe, fumbling with the knot.

'Jesus,' he said. 'It's as good as a chastity belt. Lie down while I get it off. I don't want to hurt you.'

She lay down on the bed, feeling like some Druid sacrifice, while patiently, frowning a little, he eased the knot apart. His kisses were so persuasive that they'd even overridden the certain knowledge that later she'd feel used and disappointed.

She thought that Adrian-like he'd fall on her at once, but he stood thoughtfully for a moment and touched her hair where it lay across the pillow before going to the other side of the room. He began to undress, throwing his clothes on a chair. His body was brown and smooth, with wide shoulders tapering down to a narrow waist and long muscular thighs. Dreamily she watched him as he moved in and out of the shadows.

Munro, driven by almost overwhelming desire after nearly a year of celibacy, had been about to push aside the bathrobe when he remembered that he didn't know if she was on the pill or not. Whatever the outcome of the night, a child definitely wasn't on the agenda for either of them, and he'd crossed the room to undress and give himself time while he frantically tried to recollect if he had any condoms. Eventually he remembered there was a packet in an old sponge-bag in the chest of drawers, found it, and went back to the bed.

She looked up at him, eyes like black ink in the moonlight, her hair flung across the pillow, and smiled. He sat down on the bed and gently put back the robe. He drew in his breath. Her breasts were full and firm, creamy-skinned with cinnamon-coloured nipples, the delicate unused areolas like newly spread petals. As he began to caress them he felt the nipples rise to his touch. He lay down beside her, and she shrugged herself free from the loose sleeves of the robe. She sighed and turned towards him, taking his breath away with soft, passionate kisses, her lips like an opening flower.

He enclosed her breasts in his hands, brushing the nipples with his lips, taking a whole tender rosette into his mouth. Her body arched against him. He was already almost lost, but had just enough control left to feel for a condom and put it on. He wanted to enter her so desperately that he couldn't hold off much longer. He

tried to dissociate himself by thinking how he'd light her face, an old trick which sometimes worked but this time was useless.

Saskia felt his hand move down her body and settle between her legs. Its movements were gentle to begin with, but rapidly became more demanding, sweeping her up faster than she ever remembered, like a surfer in a gathering wave. Already she longed to feel him inside, and drew him closer, curving her legs round his thighs. He entered her with long smooth strokes, in a strong, controlled tempo which developed inexorably into a swift climax of staccato thrusts. She heard him cry out. The wave hung, toppled and engulfed her. Like a soft throbbing anemone her body drew him still more deeply in.

Afterwards she lay for a long time suspended in a state of languorous enjoyment half between sleeping and waking. When she opened her eyes again he was lying spreadeagled across her, with his head on her breast. She touched his hair softly and said his name.

Munro raised his head and looked at her.

'It was too soon,' he said.

'No,' she said simply. 'It was just so gorgeous. I never came at the same time with anyone before.'

Munro wrapped his arms round her again, running his fingers down the groove of her spine to the sensuous curves at its base.

'And no one ever told me that before. Thank you,' he said.

He kissed her again. Her hair smelt of coconut, and her skin was faintly damp.

'My impression of your earlier boyfriends is even worse now,' he said. 'I hope there weren't too many like that?'

'Not many,' she answered. Her eyes were suddenly evasive, and he tried not to think of some insensitive prat experiencing the delights that he'd just known.

'How about you?' she asked.

'Boyfriends?' he said with a smile.

'No, you idiot. Have you had lots of girlfriends?'

'Hundreds,' he said teasingly.

She began an indignant protest, and he stopped it with a kiss. His hand moved downwards again, and slipped between her legs. His fingers very gently began to insinuate themselves among the delicate folds, searching for their heart. She gave a groan that was almost despairing, and her thighs slowly fell apart.

'More?' he said.

'More,' she answered, and laced her arms around his neck, beginning already to move her body against his.

Saskia woke to find it was day. The bathrobe was tangled round her legs, the mattress was full of lumps, but she felt as free and weightless as the motes of dust floating in the sunlight. Munro stood at the window, already dressed in a blue sweatshirt and a pair of frayed jeans. He'd brought the coffee maker upstairs. It stood on the chest of drawers, filling the room with an irresistible scent.

She scrabbled for the robe and tugged it round her. When he heard her move he came over to the bed and sat down by her side. She pulled herself up against the pillows. The bedhead creaked alarmingly.

'This is a terrible bed,' she said.

'I know. I'm sorry. And last night can't have helped it.'

He kissed her. His lips were cold, and his hand, when he slipped it inside the robe, colder still. She gasped as he touched her breast, and he took it away, looking contrite.

'Sorry again,' he said. 'I took the dog for a walk, and it's still chilly outside.'

She retrieved his hand, and laid it against her face, then kissed the palm.

'I didn't mean you to stop,' she said shyly.

The mug of coffee in his other hand shook. He put it down and gathered her into his arms, kissing her hungrily, as if the night hadn't lasted nearly long enough. Just as abruptly he stopped. She stared at him, puzzled, as he put her back against the pillows.

'God knows where this'd lead, though,' he said with a wry smile, 'I've no Durex left, and I don't suppose you want to try motherhood just yet.'

He went to the chest, and came back with a mug of coffee for her. She cradled it in her hands. His words had introduced a note of reality she wasn't sure she was ready for. Yet there were things that had to be said before she found herself acting even more crazily. Her period was almost due, but even so she'd been ready to take an enormous risk.

'I stopped taking the pill a while ago,' she said. 'But as for a baby – no. There's still so much I want to do.'

'Odd,' he said, with another smile. 'The world's full of European women trying to avoid babies, and African women longing for them. I tried to brainwash Sabah into taking the pill, but she wouldn't. She was pregnant when she died.'.

Saskia stared at him wordlessly, hardly able to bear the thought of what he must have suffered.

'There's no need to look like that,' he said. 'I still wasn't quite used to the idea. I remember I even felt disappointed at first when she told me she was pregnant because she wouldn't be able to travel with me. She'd never left Africa.'

'She must have been so brave, knowing how much she'd be alone, and the risks you'd have to take,' said Saskia, trying to keep the pity out of her voice.

His eyes were fixed on the view from the window, and she wondered if he'd even heard what she said.

'Munro,' she said gently, putting down the coffee mug, 'we have to talk about this. You've got to understand I'm not like Sabah. What I said to you in the garden at Gilead is still true. My work's the most important part of my life at the moment, and especially now because of what LeValet's just done. I can't let this mean too much. I daren't.'

He was looking at her intently.

'What are you trying to say?' he asked. 'That everything's over, or that it's to be on your terms?'

'Don't put it that way,' she said passionately. 'You know an affair would be very much on your terms as well. Even if I didn't have the responsibility of Gilead and the film, you'd still want eventually to go back to war photography. You said so yourself last time I was here. If I went on seeing you then your terms would be a hundred times harsher than mine because you might be killed, and after my father's death I don't think I could stand something like that again. It's a price I couldn't pay.'

He sat with his face becoming grimmer and grimmer as she spoke. She could hardly believe she was saying these things to him already, more like a lawyer discussing a contract than someone talking to her lover. She could feel tears pricking her eyes, and blinked them back. Whatever his reply was, she wouldn't blackmail him that way.

'Oh God,' she said. 'Why does it have to be so hard when all I want is to be with you?'

He took her in his arms.

'That's all I want too,' he said ruefully, rocking her gently, his chin on her head. 'For Christ's sake, don't cry again. We'll work it out somehow.'

He took her hand.

'Come and look out of the window,' he said. 'It's going to be a marvellous day.'

She stood by his side in the embrasure. The dew still lay heavily on the grass, but the meadows were full of

buttercups. In one of the oaks, which was still making up its mind whether to come into leaf, a cuckoo called. A plum tree dropped its last petals over the newly sown beds in the kitchen garden.

'It could be a marvellous summer,' he said. 'Why don't we simply enjoy it, with no strings attached, and see what happens? I have to go away tomorrow – I've just signed to do a series of reports on the current state of Britain. It sounds a pretentious title but it might be interesting, and I'll be back here in a couple of weeks to write the first one up. You'll have heard the result of the planning application by then, and if LeValet decides to appeal I'd rather like to have another shot at nailing him now. An exposé of the Happy Valley homes is well overdue.'

'But – tomorrow?' she said. The reality was sobering. 'Does it have to be so soon?'

He put his arm round her.

'I didn't know this was going to happen,' he said. 'And perfect though it sounds, I can't stay here chopping logs and making love to you for the rest of my life. You know it wouldn't be enough for either of us. I won't be within a thousand miles of any battle zone, I swear, and I do need to find out if I can write successfully about something different. So how about it?'

She thought, staring out towards the river. The scene in front of her was achingly beautiful, made even more so by the prospect of a summer's happiness. She couldn't pass that prospect by.

'It'll be the summer of a lifetime,' she said.

Chapter 14

After breakfast Munro showed Saskia the rest of the house. There were another half dozen bedrooms, all with sloping oak floors, set haphazardly beneath the steep roof. Downstairs the sitting room overlooked a lawn like a meadow, which he had just begun to scythe. The farm office had been converted into a study with a word processor and a fax machine, but no one had removed last year's yellowing calendar from the wall. An ancient roll top desk was stacked high with correspondence.

'I let everything go while I finished the book, and my mail's getting to the point of no return,' said Munro. 'Someone from an agency's coming in to deal with it while I'm away.'

He'd turned the dairy into a studio and dark room, organised as meticulously as an operating theatre. Saskia examined some prints stacked like pieces of toast in a drying stand, shots of mud-caked fishermen setting up eel traps in the moonlight, the wicker funnels silhouetted against a milky sky. Even untouched they were stunning. She moved over to a light table and found some astonishing colour slides of Freddy and Miss Moxon, looking like a punk elf and the White Queen respectively, stripping long strands of ivy from the statue of Pan, half covered in greenery themselves.

'These are terrific,' she said.

'They don't sell as well as horrors, unfortunately. But there's a book to be got from the metamorphosis of the

garden if Freddy or Alicia ever had time to write it,' he said. 'I wondered if you'd let me take some more photos, before the place becomes too tidy?'

'I wish you would. Morwenna tries to keep a record, but she's often too busy now.'

She studied the photos again.

'Seeing these makes it even harder for me to understand why you need to go where there's war to do satisfying work. You must know the best part of your pictures isn't the shots of battle, but the scenes of life behind the front line.'

'I was telling myself the same thing when I decided to settle down with Sabah. But living in Africa I'd have still have had the extra rush of adrenaline living in that kind of setting gives you. There's a drama round every corner, and the light and the sunshine are so incredible too. If the doctors hadn't made me swear to stay at home for at least a year after the last bout of malaria, I'd probably have returned long before this.'

Saskia was silent, thinking how difficult it would be to reconcile both their needs. Munro caught her solemn look, and kissed her.

'But let's not think of that now,' he said with a smile. 'And don't forget I promised Ben I'd bring you back by mid-morning. They'll be needing you to sort them out at Gilead as well.'

There was an air of subdued sadness at Gilead. Ben went with Saskia and Munro to the orangery to inspect the damage again. He'd already swept up the glass, and the least injured of the plants were repotted and back in position.

As well as Saskia's single flower there was a posy of lilies of the valley on Svengali's grave. Saskia, who'd been scared that the intense grief of the previous night might

return, was surprised this morning by her quiet acceptance of his death.

'Freddy put the flowers there,' said Ben. 'She was terribly upset, but Alicia took her off with Jules to the Botanic Garden to see someone who's going to advise them about new stock. And I've rung around for rough quotes to replace the glass. I'll show you them over coffee.'

When they got back to the kitchen Freddy and Miss Moxon were already there, poring over a plant catalogue. Freddy embraced Saskia, looking very pink.

'The bastards!' she said. 'They couldn't even take it out on someone their own size. You must feel awful, Sass. Even Jules knew something was wrong. He loved playing with Sven.'

'If only we'd heard LeValet's men,' said Ben, 'but it was too far from the house. I just hope he doesn't try anything else. I still don't understand why you won't tell the police you suspect him.'

'Munro told you what happened at his house,' said Saskia. 'I couldn't face talking to them about that.'

'It might be worth it in the long run,' said Munro quietly.

'No, we'll just have to be extra careful in future,' said Saskia. 'I'll have to find a caretaker for the mews flat who can keep an eye on things at that end of the garden.'

'It won't bring Sven back, whatever you do,' said Freddy.

Her eyes filled with tears. Ben hastily put a cup of coffee in front of her, and Miss Moxon, looking determinedly Pollyanna-ish, patted her on the shoulder.

'Try not to give way again, Frederica my dear. The best thing we can all do is try to get things straight as quickly as possible.'

Gradually, as they drank their coffee and discussed

replacement plants, an air of normality returned. But this brought other problems with it, for Freddy, now revived, had obviously been told by Ben where Saskia had spent the night, and kept glancing from her to Munro and smiling encouragingly at them. Saskia was deeply thankful that Morwenna hadn't yet returned.

'Carl Sandstrom rang late last night,' said Ben, 'or rather, a scratchy PA called Martha Bean did. They want to come down from London for the day to do the interview next Tuesday. He's flying in on Sunday, but he's busy the rest of the week. Your diary looked OK so I booked it.'

'So soon?' said Saskia. She felt as if she hadn't thought of the film for days. 'It's terrific news, of course, but I'll have to try and hire a lights man right away. I wonder how much footage we'll get out of the interview? We've almost too much already. Heaven knows how we're going to edit even half of it into a twenty-five-minute programme.'

'Ask Channel Five for more air time once the interview's in the can,' said Munro. 'They're sure to bite, and the book would do better still after a longer programme.'

'Writing the book's taking all my spare time as it is,' said Saskia, 'and there'll be even less if I expand the film.'

'I could do a chapter on Artemis's last years in Africa if you liked. She told me quite a lot about them when I was there, and I made notes afterwards,' said Munro.

'It'd be great, but we can't afford you,' said Saskia ruefully. 'Morwenna checked your rates with your agent when we first started.'

'Free,' said Munro, 'in payment for services rendered. The shock treatment on your first visit to the farm, if you remember.'

Saskia blushed. Everyone was looking intensely interested, and trying not to.

'Ace,' said Freddy. 'Saskia's had far too much to do.'

Munro smiled at her.

'I'll take those photos of Jules when I'm here next,' he said.

'And I must think up a menu for Sandstrom's visit,' said Ben happily, already reaching for a cookery book from the crammed shelf by the Esse. 'All I ask is for Morwenna to be in a good mood that day.'

Morwenna returned from London late in the afternoon, still high on a power lunch with a friend, Davina Travers, who'd just set up her own PR agency near Camden Lock. Saskia was in the study working on arrangements for the interview. Morwenna sauntered in wearing a rainbow-striped Mexican jacket bought in Camden Market, and threw a great heap of specimen publicity material on to the desk.

'Davina's just what we need,' she said. 'A bit Sloaney, but a real go-getter, and longing to come in on the act. I think we should let her have our account.'

'What are her fees like?' Saskia asked suspiciously.

'She's so keen she'll help us for peanuts in return for plenty of mentions. I said you didn't want a great publicity circus at the moment, and she swore she'd keep it low-key to begin with, just talking up the film in media circles where it counts. She'll go for the big hype shortly before transmission, starting off with a classy PR launch at Gilead when the film's finished. I thought we could have the launch buffet in the orangery. It'd get the press away from the house.'

She flung herself down, breathless, in Artemis's chair, and lit a cigarette.

'The orangery's not much use for anything at the moment,' said Saskia, and proceeded to tell her what had happened.

Morwenna's face changed from impatience to horror as the events in The China Clipper and LeValet's house

unfolded. She became ecstatic when she heard how Saskia had escaped.

'Great – he should have been given it in the balls years ago!' she said rapturously. 'So quick, tell me what happened next.'

Her face became solemn again as Saskia described going back to Gilead, and discovering Svengali's body.

'Oh Christ, Sass,' she said. 'I'm so sorry. What a really awful thing to have happened. I can't stand pets normally, but it was different with Sven. He was such a terrific character, and he'd been with you so long as well.'

Saskia found herself almost in tears again.

'Don't cry or I will too,' said Morwenna shakily, taking a packet of cigarettes from her pocket. 'Have a smoke. It'll calm you down.'

Saskia shook her head, and blinked away the tears. 'No. I'd love to, but I haven't had one for ages. I actually daren't. Alicia'd never forgive me. She feels it's her mission in life to make sure I don't start again.'

'Silly old bat,' said Morwenna. 'Never mind, we'll have a huge, huge drink instead.'

She felt in the bottom drawer of the desk, where she kept an emergency bottle of whisky and some paper cups. She brought one over to Saskia, and half filled it.

'Here's to Sven's memory,' she said. 'Let's hope he's chasing heavenly mice.' Her face brightened. 'Anyway, there's some great footage of him in the film, so you'll always have that.'

She became serious again. 'Did you tell the police, though? If you didn't you won't be able to claim off the insurance.'

'No – I couldn't face telling them. It'd have got into the local papers, and that's the last thing we want. I felt so awful at the time that I couldn't talk about it to anyone except Munro.'

'Hawkshaw? What's he got to do with it? I thought you'd given him the push.'

'He was at The China Clipper. He warned me off going back to LeValet's house. I should have listened. He came to Gilead later that night to see if I was all right, and found me at the orangery. I fell apart a bit after finding Sven like that, and couldn't face the others.' She hesitated. 'I went back to his house with him.'

'For Christ's sake!' said Morwenna. 'Don't you ever learn? I can guess exactly what happened next. He nobly helped you over your post-traumatic stress.'

'You could put it that way,' said Saskia, quite unable to look contrite in spite of Morwenna's expression.

'Shit!' said Morwenna. 'I go away for just one night, and the orangery's turned into a scrap heap, Sven's murdered, and to top it all you go to bed with the biggest chauvinist in Britain.'

'He's not, and if you stopped sniping at him every time he appeared you might find that out for yourself. You should be pleased. He's going to help with the book, and you know how desperately short of time we are. He's doing it for free as well.'

'Hm, there's free and free,' said Morwenna darkly. 'God knows we could do with some help, though, especially on the book. I'll have to go along with you, I suppose, but it'll be such a drag getting used to him around the place. It's taken me ages to adjust to Freddy and Jules. All I ask is that you don't go tripping off to the register office before the film's finished.'

'There'll be nothing like that, I promise. It's simply a casual arrangement, for the summer only, while we see how things go. I'm sure he'll take off for Africa again in the autumn, and he knows that if he goes back to war reporting we're finished.'

'Well, I just hope he's worth it. What's he like in the sack?'

'Brilliant,' said Saskia, with a grin. 'And now can we drop the subject and talk about something that *will* please you? We have to put everything else on hold because Sandstrom's coming to do the interview next Tuesday.'

It was a perfect day for Carl's visit. They were primed beforehand by a letter from Martha Bean, which came by courier next day, saying exactly when they'd arrive and depart, stipulating that filming should take no longer than an hour, and insisting that Carl had a rest after lunch. A heavily underlined final sentence said that no potentially distressing questions should be asked. Saskia had a strong suspicion Carl had never actually seen this document.

His limousine rolled up outside the front gate at Gilead exactly at half-past ten, as promised. He was wearing a blue open-necked shirt, slacks and a casual sports jacket in heathery Donegal tweed, but Martha, obviously in no mood to make concessions, was encased in a formidable grey pin-striped suit.

Saskia had agonised beforehand over how he'd get on with Morwenna. A lack of rapport between them could so easily torpedo the whole proceedings. She needn't have worried, though, for he won Morwenna over instantly by saying that he'd had her two latest documentaries sent to him in the States, and was so impressed that he'd mentioned her work to the head of Colossus Television in Los Angeles.

'Holy cow!' said Morwenna, whose slang had taken a transatlantic turn for the occasion. 'If I could get in with that set-up I'd be made.'

Artemis's study provided a quietly dignified setting for the interview. Through the windows standard roses had begun to flower, pale blooms the colour of vanilla ice

in subtle contrast with the sombre green of the hedges. They'd spent all the previous day working out shots, using Ben as a stand-in for Carl. Saskia had implored the lights technician to be as unobtrusive as possible, and sworn him to secrecy until Carl left Gilead.

Carl sat patiently now while Morwenna made some final adjustments to the camera. Saskia, wearing a long ecru linen jacket and terracotta-coloured trousers, had planned to position herself out of shot, while he sat opposite her in Artemis's chair, sideways to the window. But at the last minute he insisted on her appearing too.

'Talking to you will be the best thing about the interview for me,' he said, 'and you're part of the Artemis story as well. The viewers will feel cheated if they don't see you.'

'Haven't I been saying that all along?' Morwenna said to Saskia. 'Sit at the other end of the window seat, and pull the curtain slightly behind you so that the light doesn't get in the way. I can include you both in an establishing shot, and we'll do the noddies afterwards.'

Saskia took up her place on the window seat, her list of questions lying unobtrusively beside her. Carl's face and silver hair were given extra dramatic contrast against the tall back of the ebony chair by a keylight positioned high above his head.

'Right,' he said. 'Let's begin. Martha's already got out her stopwatch.'

Saskia glanced round the room. The lights man had stashed himself in a corner, and Martha was sitting quietly by the door with her tape recorder. Everything seemed perfect.

'OK, silence for camera,' she said. 'And roll it now.'

Carl was a genius in front of the camera, as relaxed as though it was his closest friend, and yet knowing exactly how to manipulate it to give the greatest effect to his words. Prompted by a few quiet questions he began to

talk about the beginning of the affair with Artemis and how he'd deliberately set out to woo her. Saskia, with a growing surge of excitement, sensed already that the interview was set to make unique television.

The room was utterly still, everyone completely enthralled, when he went on to describe how, as they fell more and more deeply in love, the central dilemmas of his wife's illness and Artemis's work became increasingly difficult to resolve. There were occasional short pauses as he stopped to remember certain events accurately, but Saskia still kept the camera on him, fearful of breaking the spell, and Morwenna responded heroically to the challenge of such an immensely long take.

His account of Artemis's final decision to leave him, at a party following the premiere of *The Eye of the Storm*, conveyed his anguish so movingly that Saskia felt a lump in her throat, and saw the tough Martha surreptitiously wiping her eyes. Carl came from a generation of men who didn't display their feelings readily, but his voice was unsteady as he brought the story to an end.

'I hoped up to the final moment that she might change her mind, but she didn't. The last I ever saw of her was on the deck of a liner, moving out into New York Sound. That's not a form of parting I recommend. It's slow torture to see a boat drawing away with someone you love on board, as though it's drawing out your heart with it. And I never saw her again.'

The whole room seemed to be holding its breath as Saskia's final question hung in the air.

'I always suspected she regretted her decision, though she never actually said so. Did you feel that too?'

'Yes, because in spite of all the arguments and all the bitterness, she was as much taken apart by the ending of the affair as I was. I've always thought there was some additional reason, something that I didn't

pick up in time, that drove her to go through with it.'

He was silent for a moment, looking out over the garden, and Morwenna zoomed slowly out to include Saskia in the closing seconds.

'Artemis was never deliberately cruel,' he said eventually, 'never one to pass up on happiness. I can't believe her career was the only reason for leaving me. At the end I was so desperate to keep her I was even willing to live apart if I could just visit her in Africa now and then. It's still a puzzle to me, nearly fifty years on. But our affair is not something I ever regret.'

There was another long silence, until Saskia, intensely moved, finally remembered to bring the filming to a close.

'Wrap!' she said exultantly, throwing down her notes. 'Congratulations everyone, and especially Carl. That was outstanding.'

'Geronimo!' said Morwenna. 'And all in one take. I must have broken every rule in the book.'

Carl smiled at Saskia. 'I'm glad you're both pleased, because that's one performance I certainly don't intend to repeat.'

'I should damn well think not,' said Martha, stomping forward, her usual belligerent self once more. 'You look wiped out, Carl. That's quite enough for one day. You're not thirty still, you know.'

'So you keep reminding me,' said Carl, tempering his words by laying his hand affectionately on her shoulder. He turned to Saskia again. 'But I'm sure Martha'll let you have some time for fill-in shots. Then how about showing me the rest of the house before we eat?'

They had a formal lunch in the dining room. The long table was polished to a silken sheen, and adorned with

the best silver and bowls of flowers. Ben had cooked crab and mushroom in puff pastry cases. There were tender mange-tout peas and new potatoes in garlic butter. Afterwards he served a great mound of raspberries in a crystal bowl with clotted cream and crisp tuiles amandes.

When they'd finished Martha firmly shepherded Carl to the study, and sat outside the door like a French concierge while he had a nap in one of the leather armchairs for an hour. He reappeared in the drawing room at three looking refreshed, and casting an amused eye over the others who had decamped there to collapse after the rigours of the morning.

'Martha keeps reminding me that I have another appointment in London this evening,' he said, 'but I must see the garden before I go.'

Accompanied by Freddy and Miss Moxon, they made a brief tour of the grounds, but as they started back to the house Miss Moxon tactfully shunted Freddy into the orangery, leaving Saskia alone with Carl. They went slowly down the long walk, where lavender and rosemary tumbled from the raised beds, and on to an arbour above the rill. There was a stone seat beneath a buddleia thronged with butterflies. They sat down for a moment to admire the view.

'It's been a marvellous day,' Carl said. 'And you've all taken so much trouble to make me welcome.'

'We're honoured,' she said. 'It's been a great pleasure for everyone.'

'Maybe you'd let me visit you again when I'm next in the UK?'

'Come and stay,' said Saskia. 'We've almost too much room, as you've seen.'

He looked thoughtfully over the garden. 'I'd like that. But this place is so beautiful I think I should find it addictive if I stayed too long. Now I've seen it I even

wonder if this is what drew Artemis away from me. If you lived here you'd begin to think you needed nothing else.'

'But Artemis did go away. She went back to Africa often.'

'Maybe she found out it wasn't good to stay forever.' He suddenly and disconcertingly changed the subject, turning on the seat and fixing his eyes on her. 'Do you have a boyfriend, I wonder? A partner, I should say, though I don't go for the term much.'

'In a way,' said Saskia hesitantly.

Carl smiled. 'What does that mean?'

'He's a photo-journalist. He works abroad most of the time. He's just here till the end of the summer, so it probably won't come to anything.'

'What's his name? Should I have heard of him?'

'Munro Hawkshaw. He's a war reporter.'

'Isn't he the guy who sent out all those incredible stories from the siege in Beirut? The one who talked the Shi-ites into releasing a hostage? I remember seeing him on the cover of *Time* magazine a few years back.'

'That's Munro,' said Saskia, 'and his addiction is war, which is why it probably won't work out.'

'But you'd like it to?' persisted Carl.

'Perhaps. But I haven't known him very long, and there's the problem of my career as well.'

'I hope for his sake that you don't make the same decision as Artemis,' said Carl.

He took her hand, and kissed it in an old-fashioned, courtly gesture. Saskia thought how corny it could have been, yet coming from him it seemed exactly right.

'You must forgive the sage advice, but I'd hate you to be hurt,' he said. 'I feel I have a special interest in you now, and it's an unexpected bonus for someone of my age. Perhaps I can meet your Mr Hawkshaw one day.'

* * *

When Saskia ran through the interview after Carl had gone it was so impressive that she decided she must approach Channel Five for more air-time. She took a copy to London with her, and saw the face of their programming executive become ecstatic as he watched the monitor. Afterwards he took her out to lunch at Wheeler's, and melted like the butter on the grilled soles they were consuming.

'Fabulous, darling,' he said. 'Normally you wouldn't have had a hope in hell of more time at this stage, but that footage is shit-hot, and I'll fix a fifty-minute slot for you somehow. No more cash up front, I'm afraid – that really is out of the question – but we'll increase the final payment substantially of course. I'll send you the details. And anyway, you'll be able to make a killing on the news rights.'

In the train on the way home Saskia tried to make up her mind about asking Mr Elder if she could increase the mortgage. There were only too many arguments in its favour. Extending the film on the present budget would involve miracles of economy, never her strong point. She was also seriously tempted to round out the film with some present-day shots of Artemis's former study area in northern Kenya. Morwenna would jump at the chance of a solo trip while Saskia stayed behind to sort out the post-production.

The bills for repairing and restocking the orangery would be rolling in any day as well. And on investigation, Davina Travers's fees certainly weren't the peanuts Morwenna had mentioned, though she was going to be worth every penny of them. Metropolis had started putting out publicity for Adrian's offering which made it sound like the most sensational bio-documentary since Ken Russell's Tchaikovsky film.

She arrived at Gilead to be greeted by the news that

LeValet's planning application had failed, and he intended to appeal.

'It was good of my old pupil to let me know unofficially right away,' said Miss Moxon. 'He said the appeal would be heard about four months from now, and LeValet's likely to bring in a lawyer. He thought you should really engage one yourself.'

'The film might just be finished by then,' said Saskia. 'Channel Five are trying to get us a new slot towards the middle of October. But was he sure about the lawyer? Heaven knows what the fees would be.'

'He said LeValet will probably have the best legal representation money can buy.'

'Then that clinches it. I shall have to ask for more money,' said Saskia, resigned to the inevitable at last.

She approached Mr Elder again with deep trepidation, and was surprised when he didn't seem too shocked by her request.

'I thought you'd underestimated your requirements,' he said sagely. 'So many new businesses do. I'm sure Mr Sainthill would be interested in your proposition. I'll get in touch with him at once.'

Saskia's trepidation increased when Mr Sainthill asked to see Gilead for himself. But he turned out to be a charming and courtly old gentleman, and after he'd been given lunch and a conducted tour, he agreed with a surprising lack of fuss to make the loan up to £100,000.

The sum was so colossal that she felt almost faint whenever she thought of it, and it was immensely reassuring to hear Munro's calm comment when he reappeared in the middle of June.

'Just stay cool and forget about the mortgage till the film's finished. From the footage you've shown me it's already well on the way to being a winner. Now how about coming out with me this evening?'

He took her to dinner at a French bistro in Bath, and persuaded her to spend the next couple of weekends at the farm. They passed the first weekend, two scorching midsummer days, making love and going for lazy trips in an old sailing dinghy he'd just acquired. LeValet wasn't mentioned until they were having breakfast on the Monday morning. Munro was padding about the kitchen in bare feet as he fetched butter and jam to accompany some croissants. Saskia sat at the table drinking apple juice, and thinking that it couldn't have been less like breakfast with Adrian, which was usually taken on the run while they had the first row of the day.

Munro came to the table and poured himself a cup of coffee. He was sunburnt after a weekend out of doors, hair falling untidily to one side, eyes deep blue against his tan. He caught her looking at him, and smiled.

'What is it?' he asked. 'Having second thoughts?'

She decided to tease him. 'Of course not. I just thought you looked well at last – I'm sure your mother would approve.'

He took a croissant and began to butter it.

'Sex is obviously good for the post-malarial state,' he said. 'It certainly can't be the effect of Toxteth and Tyneside. But what would your mother say, I wonder?'

'She'd approve of all this domesticity,' she said, 'though she'd think I should be getting your breakfast.'

'What's your mother like? You don't talk about her much.'

'I've seen very little of her since she remarried. We were very close before my father died, but not since then. She's become intensely conventional, and it's difficult to know what goes on underneath all the social veneer. All I do know is that she infuriates me a lot of the time, though we've been getting on better lately. The other problem

is that she used to be a friend of LeValet, and that's something I can't understand.'

'Have you told her what he did to you?'

'No. I couldn't bear to. But she's scared of LeValet herself, in spite of the earlier friendship.'

He passed her the toast, and poured some more coffee.

'We ought to get the ground work on the exposé of the Clifton Happy Valley home done before I have to go off on my next shoot. Freddy was telling me she has a friend who works there. I'll talk to her this morning when I take you back to Gilead. How about if we visit the home next weekend?'

'All right,' said Saskia unenthusiastically, depressed at the thought of his going away again, and by the prospect of having to battle with LeValet once more. It would be so good simply to enjoy the few days they had left, and hope for the best as far the appeal was concerned.

'You needn't come with me if you don't want to. Don't forget you're not used to newsgathering of that sort. You probably won't like it much.'

'Of course I'll go with you,' she said indignantly. 'It's my responsibility as much as yours. I just hate wasting the little time we have. And anything to do with LeValet seems like poison to me.'

'All the more reason to nail him now, in that case.'

When they got back to Gilead Freddy was dividing clumps of bulbs on the terrace. It was another hot day, and she leaned on the fork while she listened to Munro, her face scarlet with exertion.

'My mate in the home's one of the best,' she said eagerly. 'Her name's Maeve. LeValet pays her slave wages, of course, but her husband's unemployed and she daren't give up the job. If you go in the evening the matron's usually asleep in front of the telly then.'

'Right,' said Munro. 'And could you arrange for me to meet Maeve beforehand? Perhaps over a pub lunch, wherever's best for her?'

'No problem,' said Freddy, wiping her forehead on her arm.

'Cooee, Saskia!' a voice floated up from the plat.

Freddy looked apologetically at Saskia.

'It's your mum, I'm afraid. She turned up here after breakfast, and didn't seem to have anything to do. We gave her some weeding, but she pulled up all the wrong things, so Al steered her towards flower arranging instead.'

Laura swayed towards them with a trug full of flowers. She was wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat wound round with a chiffon scarf, and a pair of candy-striped dungarees quite unlike Freddy's. They were so tight-fitting that Saskia wondered how she could bend at all. The general effect, only slightly marred by the rubber gloves Laura had borrowed from the kitchen, was one of Marie Antoinette playing at milkmaids.

'Darling, where have you been all weekend? I wanted to see you, but Ben said you'd gone to visit a friend in the country.'

Her gaze moved to Munro, and her eyes widened. Saskia could see her mind working like a calculator as she tried to deduce his social class, and what his relationship could possibly be to her daughter.

'This is Munro Hawkshaw, Laura,' said Saskia. 'Munro, meet my mother, Laura Smythe.'

Laura put down the trug with a graceful sideways bob and a sigh as if she was far too frail for such a heavy load, pulled off a glove, and held out her hand. She switched on the smile reserved for men she thought particularly attractive.

'Delighted to meet you, Mr Hawkshaw.' Her eye fell on his camera. 'You have a perfect day for photography.

So many gardening experts want to take pictures here. It's quite exhausting showing them all around.'

'Munro's a photo-journalist,' said Saskia shortly. 'We might do a book on the garden later on.'

He was looking at Saskia with a ghost of a smile, as if he knew her thoughts.

'I'm normally a war photographer, Mrs Smythe,' he said. 'This is a sideline.'

'How tremendously exciting,' said Laura. 'I was once involved in a minor coup in South America. My second husband's a diplomat, and we were holed up in the embassy for a week. Everything was cut off. I couldn't even have a bath.'

'Dreadful,' said Munro seriously.

'I expect you've had some experiences like that, Mr Hawkshaw.'

'Laura! Of course he has!' Saskia burst out. 'Munro was in the siege of Beirut.'

'There's no need to snap at me,' she said, and turned again to Munro. 'Saskia's been very edgy recently. She's so wrapped up in her work.'

'You would be too, with a mortgage like hers,' said Freddy, casting her eyes heavenwards in exasperation.

Laura looked unexpectedly shamefaced.

'Well, yes,' she said awkwardly. 'I didn't think of that. She has had a lot to deal with since she came to Gilead. And she worked so hard at Metropolis too.'

Saskia prayed that her mother wouldn't mention Adrian.

'She's really coped very well,' Laura burbled on. 'We've all helped her, of course. Some days I've felt quite exhausted.'

'Munro's very busy too,' said Saskia in desperation. 'He has to go in a minute. And shouldn't you be at the boutique?'

'I'm sure he'll stay for coffee,' Laura said. 'Go and put

the kettle on, Saskia, and I'll show him the herbaceous borders while you're making it. Monday's always so quiet I decided to close the boutique for the day and come and help you instead.'

She tucked her arm in Munro's.

'Have you been to South America, Mr Hawkshaw?'

'I was in Buenos Aires after the Falklands War,' he said.

Saskia watched him walk away arm in arm with her mother. She was so convinced that Laura would tell him about her relationship with Adrian that she began to prepare a long and spirited defence of herself. Her relief was enormous when they returned to the kitchen still talking about South America.

He only stayed for a little while after that, and Laura insisted on going with them to the front gate. His kiss as he left Saskia was a model of sedateness.

'What a nice man,' said Laura, the instant the gate had closed behind him. 'Why haven't you told me about him before?'

'Because there's nothing to tell,' said Saskia. 'It's just one of those casual things. And please, Laura, on no account mention Adrian to him. I don't want Munro to know yet that we lived together.'

'Darling, you know me – the soul of discretion,' said Laura, who loved secrets and did very occasionally manage to keep one. 'All I want is for you to be happy. And I do like him. He could dress a little better, but I'm sure you could tactfully persuade him into a suit.'

The following Friday evening Munro appeared at Gilead with his camera and notebook. To Saskia's eyes he looked remarkably calm for someone who was about do some serious trespassing. She knew that if they were discovered at the Happy Valley home the adverse publicity could be

so damaging that the appeal would go automatically in LeValet's favour.

Her own time since the weekend had been taken up by a short but exhausting location trip to Northumberland with Morwenna, filming the farm where Artemis had stayed with her sister when she returned from the States. The weather was appalling in the north, and the present tenant of the farm only grudgingly co-operative. She couldn't find anyone who remembered Artemis, and Meg, who had recently been taken into hospital, was so ill that she didn't even recognise Saskia.

As she walked with Munro through the streets where daylight had just faded, she felt cold with apprehension, though it had been a glorious day and the air was still warm. She was wearing navy jeans, a black long-sleeved T-shirt, and trainers. Munro had warned her to put on something dark and easy to run in. She was surprised he hadn't taken the car, but he said it would be easier to make a quick getaway on foot.

Through the perimeter fence they saw that the home was in semi-darkness, though a single path of light streamed out between the half-open curtains of a downstairs front window.

'There are security lights,' said Munro, 'but Maeve said she'd sneak into the office when the matron's asleep, and programme them to turn off between ten and eleven.'

Saskia followed him over the high locked gate, hauling herself up with some difficulty, and wishing she was more like Kate Adie. Munro loped towards the house at a tremendous rate as she scuttled behind him trying to look as if she wasn't there. They climbed another gate, and dropped down into the high-walled yard which held the dustbins. It was very dark, and Munro switched on a torch. In their path was an overturned bin. A river of rotten vegetables and decomposing food spilled

from its mouth. Munro pushed the bin with his foot, there was a sudden convulsive movement among the filth, and she was blinded by the flash of his camera. When she could see again, a rat was scampering beneath the gate. She leaned against the wall, her heart racing.

'The flash – supposing someone saw it?' she said breathlessly, wondering what exactly the penalty for trespassing was. It could even be prison for all she knew.

'Not very likely. Maeve did me a floor plan, and it's just the inmates' rooms on this side. She said she'd make sure their curtains were closed.'

They began to climb the iron fire escape which led upwards from the yard. It reminded Saskia unnervingly of the escape on which she'd had an attack of vertigo at school, but at least in the darkness she couldn't see the ground dwindling beneath her.

When they arrived at the second floor Munro knocked gently on a window pane. After some struggling with a catch on the inside it was thrown open. As he clambered over the ledge, the headlamps of a car in a side road briefly swept the compound, and the drop below was revealed with sudden and sickening clarity, as if a light had been flashed down a well. The old familiar surge of panic swept over her. She could do nothing except cling to the window ledge, immobile with terror, until the car mercifully passed by.

'Come on, Saskia,' said Munro. 'What are you waiting for?'

He took her arm and hauled her inside. As she came into the light, desperately trying to appear as if nothing had happened beyond a need to regain her breath after the climb, she saw that they were in Tilly's room. Tilly was sitting bolt upright in bed, her hair standing on end, looking terrified and excited at the same time. A young

girl in an overall, with a round open face and candid blue eyes, was smiling at them.

'Hi,' she said, putting out her hand. She had a soft Irish accent. 'I'm Maeve, and you must be Saskia. I've met Munro already.'

'It's great of you to do this for us,' said Saskia, feeling slightly calmer at the sight of Maeve's unruffled expression. 'Are you sure it won't get you into trouble?'

'I don't care if it does. I'm leaving at the end of the week. I've got a job in a decent home at last, thank the Lord. I couldn't take how they treat the old folks here much longer.'

'Where's Alicia?' quavered Tilly from her bed.

Saskia sat down by her side, and took her hand.

'She's coming to see you tomorrow. This is another friend called Munro. We're just going to have a little look around, but you mustn't tell anyone we're here. Promise? We'll come and see you later.'

Maeve shut the window and closed the curtains. She produced from her pocket a piece of cake wrapped in a paper napkin and gave it to Tilly.

'Eat this, my darling,' she said, 'and I'll make you some cocoa when we come back. You can have a nice little snooze while you're waiting for us.'

She turned back to Munro and Saskia.

'Shall we go now? When I checked Matron's office she was fast asleep.'

They went out into the corridor. Saskia felt exposed and vulnerable under the bare light bulbs. Munro was a few steps ahead, talking in a low voice to Maeve, and making notes. He seemed to be absolutely oblivious to Saskia. He was normally so aware of her reactions that it felt extremely odd, like a deliberate withdrawal of affection. She told herself that this was a professional assignment for him, and she'd be exactly

the same if she was on location, but it didn't help at all.

They turned a corner and came to double swing doors. Maeve paused.

'There are two wards for the chronically ill patients. I'd show you mine, where the old men are, but it's not as bad as this one. The night nurse here just doesn't care. It's her supper break now, so she's off at the pub for an hour. If you give the orderly a sweetener she won't grass on us. You won't like what you see, but every time someone tries to make improvements Matron just switches things back to how they were.'

The ward was built on to the back of the house, a long room with high iron beds ranged down each side, and lights burning dimly above them. A depressed-looking orderly in a grubby overall was reading a magazine at a central table. Saskia saw Munro tuck a bank note into her pocket.

There was no brightness anywhere. The bedsteads were black, the sheets and thin cotton blankets a dingy grey, and the patients clothed in shroud-like gowns of yellowing calico, as if they were already half dead. A smell compounded of excrement and corruption hung in the air.

An old woman whose witch-like strands of hair were matted with food had drawn the sheets round her into a nest, and was rocking back and forth on the stained mattress while the bed head bumped hollowly against the wall. Another sat with her arms tied with bandages to the bed-head above her. A mass of scratches and weeping sores, livid against her yellow skin, disfigured her face. Her hands, with long uncut nails, dangled limply from her wrists like the claws of a bird hung on a butcher's rail.

To Saskia's shocked gaze it looked like an engraving of a scene in a Victorian mad-house. She sat down on an

empty bed, feeling sick. Even Munro seemed momentarily stunned.

'Jesus,' he said in a low voice.

He stood for a minute as if he was trying to collect himself, then began slowly and systematically to move down the ward, taking photos as he went, pausing every now and then to try a new angle or wait for the exact expression he wanted. Maeve went with him, trying to reassure the patients. The ancient heads turned on long scraggy necks, following them with puzzled, lost expressions, their feeble voices pleading for attention like the cries of ghosts.

Munro came to the woman tied to the bed. Her gown had ridden up above her knees and her exposed, scrawny legs again reminded Saskia horribly of a plucked bird. He hesitated for a moment, gently pulled down the gown, and began to photograph her. It was too much for Saskia. She rushed to his side.

'Don't,' she said. 'She's too vulnerable. She doesn't know what's going on. You can't even ask her if she minds. I think we should scrap the whole thing.'

Munro stopped and stared at her. It seemed to take him a moment to focus on what she was saying. His face was hard.

'What the hell do you want then, Saskia? For these homes to continue? For LeValet to treat yet more people this way? If she knew what was going on she'd want the world to know. If I could ask her permission I would, but I'm not going to lose this chance to nail LeValet.'

'She might not want the world to know, if she knew it meant appearing like this on the cover of some Sunday supplement.'

'What's the greater evil?' he demanded. 'To appear in a media photo, or to stay here for the rest of her life? Just let me get on with it, for Christ's sake.'

He was unanswerable. She stood dumbly by while he

finished shooting in the ward, then moved on with Maeve towards the sluice. As she opened the door a smell like a midden blasted out at them. Saskia, looking over Maeve's shoulder, took one glance at the unemptied bed pans and trays of soiled dressings, and recoiled, trying not to vomit. Doggedly Munro took a series of photos even in there. When he'd finished Maeve bustled them away.

'The night nurse will be back in a minute. It's only safe to stay a little longer, anyway, and you must see the kitchen and bathrooms before you go.'

The baths were half full of cold, scummy water, and wet towels lay on the floors. In the kitchen the sink was stacked high with dirty dishes for the morning staff, half-used containers of food had been left on the tables, and cockroaches scuttled across the floor. Munro continued to take photos, still oblivious to everything else. The longer he went on the more scared Saskia felt that they'd be found out, and after their argument in the ward the sensation that he'd somehow abandoned her was growing even stronger. She felt heavy with dread, almost the way she'd felt on the fire escape, almost as if how she was feeling now had grown out of that. She kept telling herself desperately that it was merely the result of being over-tired, but still she couldn't entirely repress it.

Munro finished at last. Maeve, obviously on tenterhooks herself, sighed with relief.

'You really must go now,' she said. 'There's only fifteen minutes left. I won't get my final pay if we're found out.'

They hurried back to Tilly's room, Saskia convinced that the matron was going to appear at any moment. Tilly seemed unconcerned. She was wide awake, and humming a song to herself.

'Where's my cocoa?' she said.

'In a minute,' said Maeve. 'I haven't forgotten.' She turned to the others.

'She'll be all right. Just go.'

'Let me talk to her – five minutes only, I promise,' said Munro.

Saskia felt like screaming. Munro smiled at Maeve.

'Holy Mother of God, you'll have us all in the police station,' she said. 'But all right then. Just while I make Tilly a drink.'

She disappeared, and Munro sat down on the bed. He took Tilly's hand.

'Would you tell me a little about how you're looked after here, Tilly? I know you're tired, but it might help you leave the home.'

'Leave? But they say I can't,' said Tilly.

'Who told you that?' said Munro.

Patiently he questioned her, and bit by bit extracted a tale of petty bullying and deprivation that chilled Saskia's blood. By the time Maeve reappeared with the cocoa she didn't think she could have listened to another word.

Maeve opened the window. A clock outside was chiming eleven. There was the sound of car wheels on the gravel outside the front door.

'Go,' said Maeve, whose voice now had a hint of panic in it. 'That could be LeValet himself. He often visits around this time. He says he's checking up. We don't usually see him on the wards, but you can never be sure.'

Munro snapped off the small tape-recorder in his free hand, and got up. 'Thanks, Tilly,' he said gently. 'You don't know how well you've done, but you soon will.'

Saskia whispered her own thanks to Maeve, and clambered through the window, terrified that the security lights would blaze on at any moment and again reveal the drop below. She could hardly believe her luck as the escape remained in darkness until she'd fumbled her way cautiously to the ground. Munro arrived by her side, and they scrambled over the first gate into the

outer compound. The lights stayed off, and Saskia rushed towards the main gate, which was now open. Munro put a restraining hand on her arm.

'Look,' he said.

A car was drawn up outside the front door. Saskia recognised it instantly.

'It is LeValet's,' she said. Through the half-curtained window she could see two figures silhouetted against the light. 'He must be in the matron's office.'

'We can't leave this,' said Munro, and made for the window.

Saskia followed, almost weeping with anxiety.

'We must go,' she said. 'We'll blow everything if we're caught now.'

'Wait till you see this,' said Munro. There was laughter in his voice and she wondered wildly how he could possibly find anything to be amused at.

Cautiously she peered into the room. The matron was lolling back on an examination couch, one leg raised coquettishly above her head, while LeValet peeled off her stocking like the skin from a ripe banana.

Munro lifted his camera and pressed the shutter release. Again Saskia was blinded by the flash. She felt him grab her hand and drag her towards the gate. The security lights came on, flooding the compound, and an alarm began to wail. They tore through the gate into the road, and she ran and ran until her chest was bursting.

Chapter 15

They finally arrived in the deep concealing darkness under one of the trees in Victoria Square. Saskia rested against the trunk, panting and feeling she'd never get her breath back.

'He won't catch us now,' said Munro, 'and he won't call the police either. They'd see too much.'

He did up his jacket over his camera, put his arm round her and began to walk her back through the side streets towards Gilead. They'd arranged to collect Munro's car there and go on to his house for the weekend. Saskia was still trying to breathe normally and at the same time adjust to her reactions at the home. They were both silent until they got inside the front door at Gilead.

Morwenna was out at a party, and faintly through the drawing room door Saskia could hear Ben and Freddy laughing.

'Would you like some coffee?' she asked.

'Not now,' he said. He shrugged uncomfortably in his clothes. 'I feel dirty after that place. Do you mind if I have a shower before we go?'

She showed him the bathroom, and went into her bedroom. The room was tranquil, full of memories of Artemis as always. Her spirit, warm and indomitable, still seemed to linger there. Through the window the city spread out beyond the garden, necklaces of lights twinkling in a hundred streets.

She dragged off her clothes, which seemed to smell far

worse than after the last visit, found a clean sweater and jeans, and put them on. While she waited for Munro she sat down at the dressing table, staring at herself in the mirror as she tried to deal with her thoughts.

Nightmarish images from the home still lingered in her mind, but the sensation of insecurity when Munro became so absorbed by his work had been just as disturbing. It was even more irrational when she considered how she'd been the one to insist on the tentative nature of their relationship. Perhaps it meant she was becoming too reliant on him, and losing the ability to function effectively on her own.

Artemis's jewel box was on the dressing-table top. She opened it almost absent-mindedly, and took out the rope of amber beads. They were warm and smooth, and still smelt very faintly of Artemis's perfume. She longed for Artemis to be there, to sort out her feelings for her as she had so many times before. She put the beads round her neck. As they lay against her body the scent became stronger, supplanting in her mind the smell of the home, and it seemed almost as if Artemis was with her. Suddenly and again completely illogically she felt she couldn't bear to leave the safety of the room that night.

She was still sitting there, thinking about Artemis, when Munro returned. His hair was damp, and he was smiling.

'So this is where you sleep,' he said, looking around, and dropping his jacket and camera on a chair. 'Marvellous view, and that's an Arab bed from Lamu, isn't it?'

'It was Artemis's bedroom too,' she said, looking at him over her shoulder in the mirror. She still felt isolated from him.

He came to her and kissed the back of her neck, lifting her hair.

'You smell nice,' he said, 'but not of yourself. What's that scent?'

'It's Artemis's,' she said in an expressionless voice. 'I'm wearing her amber.'

He sat down on the end of the bed, watching her face in the mirror.

'What's the matter?' he asked. 'We got exactly what we needed. You're not still worried about trespassing, are you?'

'It's just that you seemed – different.' She hesitated. 'Remote, somehow. I found it a bit difficult to handle.'

He looked puzzled.

'But you of all people should understand that. I was doing a professional job. I had to concentrate.'

'I know,' she said miserably. She got up and went to sit beside him. 'Maybe it was the effect of that place. It had such a poisoned atmosphere. And I don't know why, but I miss Artemis tonight.'

His face softened, and he took her in his arms.

'Perhaps you think too much about Artemis,' he said. 'It's time to let go of her a little.'

He began to kiss her, moving her back gently on to the bed. She wanted to respond, but something held her back, and the continuing sense of Artemis's presence made it even harder to relax. After a few moments he stopped, looking down at her with a slight smile.

'It's still not right, is it?' he said.

'I'm sorry. I feel so tired, and I keep remembering the home. I was sure we'd be caught.'

They were the sort of excuses Adrian would have demolished with a single scornful sentence, but although Munro looked disbelieving he actually appeared to consider them.

'I wonder if it isn't more likely to be something to do with this room and Artemis,' he said eventually. 'Gilead is too damned atmospheric sometimes.'

'I've told you, I'm just tired, and it's been a non-stop

week. Everything's gone wrong. Why don't you go back to the farm, and I'll come over in the morning?'

There was a long silence while his eyes searched her face.

'Right, if that's what you really want,' he said at last.

'You know it's not what I really want.' She was almost shouting at him now. 'I wish I knew why I feel this way. I wish you'd stop needling me. But OK, maybe it is because this still seems like Artemis's room and not mine.'

'And we shouldn't desecrate the shrine?' he said with an ironic smile. He got to his feet.

'That's not what I meant,' she said.

'No? The message seemed pretty clear to me. I'll see you in the morning, then. It'll give me a chance to look at the photos, anyway.'

He went over to his jacket and camera, and picked them up.

'I'll let myself out,' he said.

The moment he'd gone she regretted what she'd done. She knew he felt rebuffed, yet in spite of that her need for the peace of Gilead and the sense of Artemis's presence were still greater than anything else.

After a while she got up to run herself a bath. She opened the wardrobe to find her dressing gown and on an impulse took down Artemis's favourite caftan, a soft damask shot through with subtle blues and greens. She slipped it on, and immediately it was as though Artemis was all around her, soothing and comforting her. Yet when she thought about it logically Artemis had been the most rational, the least fanciful of people, and would have laughed at the way she was trying to hold on to the dead. Perhaps the danger of becoming too reliant on Gilead and the memory of Artemis was just as great as becoming too dependent on Munro. It was hard by now to imagine managing without any one of them, but determinedly she

made herself take off the robe, put the beads back in the jewel box, and go to have her bath.

Saskia drove to the farm the next morning feeling sure there'd be some marked difference in Munro's attitude to her, but he seemed unaltered. He said casually that he'd started work on the exposé, but that he wanted to get some up-to-date information on LeValet's drugs racket as a tie-in before he wrote the piece. He didn't offer to show her the photos from the previous night, and she decided not to ask about them but simply to enjoy the weekend. He was due to leave immediately afterwards on the next part of his assignment, covering Scotland and the outer isles, and expected to be away at least three weeks.

When he'd gone she was so busy that she had little time to brood on his absence. Only when she finally got to bed after working into the small hours did she let herself indulge in fantasy. In it she and Munro were living together at Gilead, he was working exclusively in Britain, and she was managing to accomplish her film-making satisfactorily during his infrequent absences. It was a dream difficult to reconcile with reality, especially since he'd never actually told her that he loved her.

At least there was no further comeback from LeValet, who according to the *Sentinel* had taken off on an extensive business trip abroad. And she had stopped worrying about the orangery being vandalised again. Freddy got a squatter friend who'd been doing the heavy gardening work for her to take up temporary residence in the mews flat. He was a brawny young man built like a dump-truck, who went everywhere with an enormous dog. It had a terrifying bark which to Saskia's relief concealed the disposition of a spaniel.

By the end of July the typescript for the book had been sent off. They'd almost completed filming, apart from a

ten-day location trip by Morwenna to Kenya arranged for the beginning of August. Saskia had made a start on post-production, and was working on the stills with a rostrum cameraman. She felt desperately tired, and their October deadline seemed as hard to make as the top of Everest.

Munro returned just before Morwenna's departure. He carried Saskia off to the farm for a weekend so idyllic that she had to force herself to return to Gilead on the Monday morning. Her reluctance to go back to work became even stronger when she walked into the kitchen with Munro in search of coffee, to find Morwenna there scowling over her Kenya itinerary, and smoking furiously.

Her cassette player, balanced on a pile of guide books, blasted out a Public Enemy tape. She was leaving the following day, and her hair had just been cropped into a spiky hedgehog cut for the trip, and coloured to a shade verging on burnt orange. She was wearing one of Ben's shirts with Levis rolled up to the knee. She looked up as Saskia came in, and her frown deepened when she saw who was with her. Morwenna and Munro had never managed to progress beyond a sort of wary truce, in spite of all Saskia's efforts.

'What's wrong?' said Saskia.

'Not enough back-up in Kenya,' said Morwenna, turning down the music to a background growl. 'Nairobi's OK, but I don't have any good contacts in the north round Artemis's study area. I need more potential troubleshooters there in case anything goes wrong.' She glowered meaningfully at Munro.

Saskia sighed as she went over to the dresser to fetch a cafetière. Morwenna had complained bitterly about Munro not offering her the names of his contacts in Kenya, but she wouldn't ask him for them herself after his previous rebuff at The Watershed, and she wouldn't let Saskia ask him either.

Munro sat down. He surprised Saskia by holding out his hand and saying to Morwenna, 'Is that your schedule? Could I take a look?'

She flicked it over to him, and lit another cigarette as he began to read.

'It is pretty tight,' he said. 'You'll have your work cut out.'

His voice was mild, but Morwenna instantly construed his remark as criticism. Saskia knew she was unusually nervous about the trip. She hadn't been to Africa before, and she had none of the accustomed resources of a big television company behind her.

'Do you think I don't know that?' she flared. 'It's tight because we're short of time and funds. We don't all have editors pouring money our way. And you're no help, keeping your contacts to yourself.'

Saskia switched on the kettle and began to measure coffee into the cafetière, trying not to show her dismay. She knew this confrontation was partly her fault. It probably wouldn't have happened at all if she'd been at home to keep Morwenna calm over the weekend.

Munro's eyes went from Morwenna's face to Saskia's. He shrugged, and tossed the schedule back to Morwenna.

'You never asked me for them,' he said.

Morwenna glared at him like an enraged bantam.

'Why should I, when you gave me the brush off at The Watershed? And you know how important this is to us.'

'My friends in Kenya are important to me. I don't want you trampling all over them,' said Munro, hunching his shoulders ominously.

'That's rich coming from you. Every time you set foot in this place you come on like the seven Samurai rolled into one. I've just about had enough.'

'Good. You'd get a lot further if you learned to bloody well back off sometimes.'

Everything Saskia had struggled to build seemed to be in danger of collapsing around her. She'd never seen Munro lose his temper completely, but she didn't think it could be far away. And Morwenna, once she got mad enough, was quite capable of threatening to walk out on the whole project. Then Saskia would be forced to take sides, and that was something she couldn't do. She decided to take an enormous chance.

'Shut up, both of you!' she shouted at them, her voice cracking with tension. 'You ought to be friends, but you never bother to try. I've had enough. If you don't stop this now you can both sod off, and I'll go it alone.'

She poured boiling water on to the coffee, splashing it over the dresser in her anxiety, and nearly scalding herself. She hadn't the slightest idea what to do if they called her bluff. When she looked up again Morwenna was sitting with her arms folded, her eyes shining, more probably with fury than tears. Saskia turned to Munro. His gaze was focused on her like a dentist's light. He glanced at Morwenna, fixed on Saskia once more, and finally gave a slow smile.

'Did anyone ever tell you two what a terrifying combination you make?' he said.

He felt inside his jacket, and took out a Filofax.

'Have you got a spare piece of paper?' he said to Morwenna. 'You may as well have my contacts in Nairobi too, but take it easy with them, will you?'

Morwenna didn't move. Saskia wondered if she'd accept the overture, or if she'd lost her.

'Come on,' said Munro, 'before Saskia disowns us both. And it'd be a pity not to make great footage even better.'

Morwenna unfolded her arms and to Saskia's amazement produced a slightly shamefaced smile.

'OK, thanks,' she said, taking up her pen. 'Sorry about

what I just said. I guess it would be a shame to mess things up when we've got so far.'

Munro began to read out addresses. Feeling as if she'd just missed being swept up in a whirlwind, Saskia finished making the coffee. They were deep in talk when she put it in front of them, and hardly seemed to notice her. Thankfully she retreated to the herb garden outside.

Still on edge after such a close brush with disaster, she sat down on the low brick wall which bordered the plot. When she took off her jacket the air was warm against her bare arms. The skies had been overcast for nearly two weeks now, and were heavy with rain, but the herb garden was sheltered on all sides. Huge cushions of thyme spilled across the path, and feathery fennel tops spread their aniseed scent around her. She began to drink her coffee, glad to be alone for a while.

Swifts were snatching up insects, planing with high-pitched calls through the still air below the eaves. In a few more weeks, when the Virginia creeper on the kitchen wall had turned to scarlet, they would be gone. She never remembered a summer rushing by so fast before. It was going to seem strange enough without Morwenna for ten days, but it was quite possible that when the autumn came both she and Munro would no longer be here. She daren't begin to think of her own feelings then.

She heard the kitchen door open as she finished her coffee. Munro appeared by her side, and sat down on the wall.

'Morwenna's phoning a friend of mine in Nanyuki,' he said. 'He knows Artemis's study area well. He sometimes takes safaris up there.'

'Thank you,' she said. She laid her head on his shoulder, and he put his arm round her.

'You should let things give a little,' he said. 'That was a big risk you took just now. You ought to have a break

while Morwenna's away. We could fly over to France for a few days. I know some people with a house in the Auvergne.'

She contemplated the idea longingly but briefly. 'I'd love to,' she said, 'but it's impossible. I've almost too much post-production work to handle as it is.'

'We needn't go for long. My friends have an office at their house, and Ben could fax through anything urgent.'

'I really don't think I can,' she said tiredly.

'I think you ought to,' he answered.

While she was trying to marshal her objections into some more coherent form, Morwenna came flying out to them, waving her schedule.

'Fabulous,' she said to Munro. 'That friend of yours in Nanyuki has a Land Cruiser, and he'll drive me up to Artemis's village himself. White hunters aren't usually my scene, but he knows the area inside out.'

'I'm glad you approve,' said Munro. 'I'm trying to get Saskia to spend a few days in France with me while you're away.'

'Great idea,' said Morwenna, already turning back to the house to make more calls. 'There's nothing here that won't keep for a while. Don't forget to bring back masses of wine.'

'How about the week beginning next weekend?' Munro asked Saskia. 'We could be back by the following Friday. And I shall be away on the last part of my assignment soon after that.'

'I truly can't leave the film or Gilead just now. LeValet's still abroad, but I'm sure Adrian's going to come up with some nasty little publicity ploy soon to try and sabotage our chances.'

He was very quiet for a while, pulling a sprig of thyme through his fingers.

'I think you're letting this get out of proportion,' he

said finally, 'but if it means so much to you, I suppose we'll have to leave it at that. I'll go on my own. I need to see the sun again.'

He was being completely unreasonable. It made her still more determined to stay at Gilead, in spite of her intense disappointment at losing a precious weekend with him. He seemed unable to understand that the film at this stage was almost like a baby, needing her constant care and vigilance before it could fend for itself. If she relaxed her attention for a moment all sorts of disasters could occur. It wasn't fair to challenge her like this.

'Fine,' she said as casually as possible. 'You do that. I'd be glad of a free run here.'

She was so busy commissioning graphics, sorting out background music, and dealing with queries on the book, that she scarcely noticed Morwenna's absence. It was harder to forget Munro, but she kept reminding herself it was good practice in case he went away permanently.

When Morwenna returned from East Africa the serious business of editing began in one of the Clifton post-production houses, and life became a permanent rush. Munro reappeared soon after. He seemed to have had a good time, though he said very little about his trip. He didn't ask her to go on holiday again, but instead they continued to snatch weekends at the farm whenever they could.

The summer began to draw to a close, but it felt to Saskia as if everything was holding its breath until the film was finished. She was busier than ever running through scores of audition tapes for the perfect voice for the commentary. Eventually after hours of listening she engaged an RSC actress who sounded uncannily like Artemis.

They recorded the voice-over in mid-September, and started to lay the sound track to the film immediately

afterwards, splicing in BBC archive clips from radio talks given by Artemis herself. Only then did Saskia begin to realise that the time when she'd have to sort things out with Munro was approaching fast. She still had no idea what he intended to do, and he seemed to be more reticent than ever about the future since his trip to France.

As the final strands of the film were woven into place, Davina arranged a publicity launch at Gilead on the first Friday in October. She intended to put out a more concentrated wave of publicity from London just before the film was transmitted. Metropolis had scheduled Adrian's documentary for early in the second week in October, so there was no fear of one of his scouts somehow hi-jacking material at that late stage. Saskia's film was due to be shown at the end of the third week, the only longer slot Channel Five had available. She was worried about the closeness of the transmissions, but the Channel Five schedulers seemed to think it wouldn't matter because of the draw of her interview with Carl.

They gambled on fine weather for the publicity launch, and their luck held. It was a clear blue early autumn day, with only a hint of early morning crispness in the air. Tables for lunch were set out on the orangery terrace, and the orange trees themselves, glossy green in their copper-hooped tubs, brought outside and dotted among them. Trestle tables with drinks and food were set up in the coolest part of the orangery, shielded from the sun by the leaves of a vine. Ben had excelled himself with boned and stuffed chicken, raised game pies, and a whole poached salmon, and had already spent part of the morning cooking for a wrap party they intended to hold at Gilead the following day.

In spite of the distance from London the press came down in hordes, together with a posse of Channel Five executives, lured by Davina's tantalising references to a

possible revelation about the Artemis/Carl relationship and the chance to see a house and garden which were almost as famous as Sissinghurst but hadn't been open to the public for many years. Unlimited pre-lunch drinks, which disappeared as fast as water in a desert, were served in the drawing room while Saskia gave an informal talk about the film. Davina circulated about the room distributing flattery and hype, and a glossy promotional brochure which had cost far too much to produce.

Things seemed to be going with encouraging smoothness as Saskia's talk drew to an end, and Morwenna got ready to screen the video on a large hired monitor. Munro had gone to London to see the features editor who'd commissioned his most recent work, and didn't expect to be back in time for the launch. Saskia was almost glad, for it was easier to concentrate on the proceedings in his absence. And Laura, who would have insisted on being present, had luckily been invited to spend a short holiday with a friend who owned a minor stately home.

The video was just about to roll when the door pushed open once more to admit a late-comer. Saskia looked up in annoyance. The curtains had been partially drawn, but there was enough light to see a heavy, familiar figure with sleeked-back hair slide into the room, take a glass of wine from a side table, and sit down on the window seat. Her heart began to thud. She tugged Morwenna's sleeve urgently.

'Look over there! It's Adrian! How the hell did he get in?'

Morwenna looked up briefly.

'Jesus, so it is! What a creep! You'd better find Davina and tell her to chuck him out double quick. I have to start the video, or they'll get restless.'

Saskia edged round the room in search of Davina, keeping as far away from Adrian as possible. It was

quite bad enough to have the press loose in Gilead like a pack of sniffer dogs, but he came into the bloodhound category.

Davina was engaged in a whispered conversation with someone from one of the glossy women's magazines. She looked bandbox neat in her navy suit, and more as if she should be chairing some charity committee. Saskia was thankful that this misleading appearance concealed an expert grasp of the perils lurking in the media world.

'Of course I didn't send any invitations to Metropolis,' she said indignantly when she heard the news. 'He must have hi-jacked someone else's. I'll see if I can get him to leave, but you know what a tricky customer he is.'

Adrian had moved to a chair and was lighting a cigarette. He appeared set for several hours of free entertainment. When Davina came back she looked worried.

'He wants to talk to you,' she said, 'and he's threatening to make a scene if we have him thrown out. He knows we can't afford adverse publicity, especially today.'

Saskia waited until the guests had filtered on to the terrace and were being shepherded towards the orangery by Davina. Adrian hadn't moved. He'd kept his eyes on her the whole time she was answering questions after the video. It was horribly unsettling to see him lounging there, so at home on her territory.

He got up and kissed her, pressing his cheek fervently against hers. He was wearing a double-breasted blazer, white slacks and two-tone brogues. They were presumably clothes he thought appropriate to the country, but they made him look like a game show host whose ratings had slipped. She couldn't imagine how she'd gone to bed with him, let alone lived with him for six months. She must have been temporarily deranged.

'Darling, you look wonderful!' he said. 'And such a background for your film! I'm not surprised you wanted to

keep it all to yourself. But we've done pretty well too. We found a fabulous Lutyens house and garden in Sussex for location shots, and we pulled in one of the top Hollywood set designers. Everyone at Metropolis is over the moon. We expect better ratings than a royal wedding.'

'You'll be lucky to top the Sunday hymns programme,' Saskia said scornfully. 'You can just push off. You weren't invited and I don't want you here.'

'Now come on, sweetie, for old time's sake. What sort of reception is this when I came to bury the hatchet?'

'There's only one place the hatchet's going to be buried and that's in your garbage-heap of a film.'

'I do believe I detect a little anxiety,' said Adrian blandly. 'I wish you could see the footage we shot in the States. We took the whole cast out there, and even managed to rent Carl Sandstrom's old home. We set up some amazing reconstructions of his life with Artemis. The poor old guy's senile ramblings are going to seem pretty pathetic by contrast, in spite of your fanfare. No wonder you gave us such a short clip in your video.'

Saskia was sure then that his spies hadn't managed to see the full footage while it was being edited, and she guessed he was worried about it. The knowledge made her return to the attack.

'Didn't you hear me, Adrian? I want you out of Gilead. We've nothing more to say to each other.'

'But surely you don't expect me to come all this way into the sticks without offering me some lunch? The journey was such a bore.'

'Tough,' said Saskia. 'You can go to a pub.'

'Sorry, darling, nothing doing. I'll go when I'm ready, maybe in about an hour if you're good. I've fixed to have drinks at the Inn on the Park with someone from CNN at five.'

He looked at his watch, shooting his cuff to reveal

diamond-studded links Saskia had never seen before. He caught her glance.

'Not bad, are they?' he said. 'A present from Tina. Unlike you she's so grateful it's almost embarrassing.'

Saskia wondered whether to have him thrown out. There were security guards on duty who'd been making sure all the visitors had invitations and didn't stray beyond the drawing room and garden. But she knew he wouldn't go without a scene, and Davina was right about adverse publicity.

'You really ought to be nicer to me,' he said. 'I know Gerald LeValet's not too pleased with you at the moment, and I've quite a bit of influence in that quarter.'

'Stuff you and LeValet,' she said angrily.

'Don't be a bad loser, darling,' he said. 'I'll just have a bite to eat and a tiny look round, then I'll go, I swear.'

Saskia hesitated. All this was wasting valuable time when she should be in the orangery spreading the gospel about her film to anyone who still appeared unconverted.

'I haven't damn' well lost anything yet,' she said, 'except maybe my sanity when I went to live with you. OK, then, but if you put a foot wrong, you're out. I'll ask Davina to make sure you don't. She'll stay with you till you go.'

Fifteen minutes later Adrian was standing under a potted palm in the orangery longing for something stronger than white wine, and trying to dislodge Davina. She was sticking to him like a wheel clamp, pouring a relentless stream of hype about Saskia's film into his ear, and resisting all attempts to chat her up. He was beginning to regret having asked Anthea's typist friend who worked in Davina's office to filch him an invitation.

To make things worse Saskia was looking marvellous, glowing with the success of the launch and some extra happiness he couldn't quite place. He covertly eyed her

through the leaves of the palm as she talked to someone from Channel Five. She was wearing a supple honey-coloured suede dress. It was very short, and her legs in pale bronze tights reminded him tantalisingly that she was like no other girl he'd ever had. He tried to suppress a disturbing pang of regret as he ground his cigarette underfoot and decided to make a quick getaway.

He took another look at Saskia and became instantly alert. The Channel Five executive had left her, and she was gazing towards the orangery door, her face alight. A man in a leather jacket and Levis was weaving purposefully through the crowd towards her. Adrian recognised the face at once. He wasn't likely to forget it. It belonged to Munro Hawkshaw, that damned awkward photo-journalist who'd made so much trouble some years ago about Adrian's programme on the Victorian explorers. He hadn't been so secure at Metropolis then, and he'd nearly lost his job because of it.

He watched, fascinated, as Hawkshaw kissed Saskia. It was only a fleeting embrace, but briefly she clung to him, her body fitting against his in a way which could only mean one thing. Adrian was startled by a severe pang of jealousy.

LeValet had been pressing him for weeks to give the gossip columns a heavily slanted account of how Saskia had ditched him and Metropolis, with the intention of implying that she had even fewer ethics than Artemis and was totally unfit to run a film company. But a lingering regard for her had made Adrian hold back. He'd secretly thought that she might even return to him when her company eventually failed. Now he suddenly saw an even better way of satisfying LeValet and at the same time punishing her for daring to leave him.

With Davina still by his side he made his way over to Saskia. Her face clouded as she saw him approach. She

glanced anxiously at Hawkshaw, and Adrian knew then that he had her cornered.

'Hallo, Hawkshaw,' he said. 'Why aren't you dodging bullets somewhere? I didn't think this was your kind of scene.'

From Hawkshaw's irritated but not particularly concerned expression Adrian deduced instantly that he didn't know Saskia had once lived with him. He decided he was going to enjoy the next few minutes. And equally pleasurable would be talking to his contact on the gossip column of one of the tabloids as soon as he got back to London.

'And I didn't think you'd been invited,' Munro answered Adrian, keeping one arm round Saskia's shoulders.

Saskia watched Davina melt away, obviously thinking that it was safe to leave Adrian with her and Munro. She felt as if her last support had gone. She'd been so certain that Munro wouldn't appear at this late stage that she hadn't been too worried when Adrian stayed on. With Davina in close attendance he couldn't do much harm.

'I thought I'd buzz down and wish Saskia luck,' Adrian replied. 'I've missed you, Sass. The office hasn't seemed the same without you.'

'Good,' she said. 'Isn't it about time you got back there?'

He didn't move. She wondered frantically if she could fake an old-fashioned swoon. But that would completely disrupt the party, which had now developed the mellow background roar of a huge success. She saw Adrian's eyes go to Munro's face. Munro was picking up some of her tension, and beginning to look impatient.

'Time to back off, Greer,' he said. 'I have a strong feeling you're not wanted.'

'No need to fuss,' said Adrian. 'Saskia knows I'm on my way. Good to have talked to you again, darling.'

He pressed his blue-shadowed jaw against her face again, and gave her bottom a vicious, surreptitious pinch.

'Call by my flat any time you're in London,' he said to her. 'Maybe you could pick up those clothes you left behind. Anthea does tend to get a little agitated when she sees them still in the wardrobe. Ciao.'

He nodded to Munro, and made his way out of the orangery, closely followed by Davina. Saskia, with a quick look at Munro's face, tried to play for time.

'The Channel Five people are leaving. I must see them off.'

She didn't move quite fast enough. Munro's hand came down on her arm.

'What the hell did he mean by that?' he said.

'For God's sake, I can't tell you here, with all the press watching everything we do,' said Saskia, looking round wildly and deciding attack was the only defence she had.

'They've already been treated to one interesting little scene. Another won't make much difference.'

'You're over-reacting,' she said furiously. 'They haven't noticed anything yet, but they will if you go on like this.'

'If you decide to play with fire, that's your look-out.'

He almost hauled her on to the terrace, and then let her go, staring at her with an expression like an Old Testament prophet searching out a sinner. Wavering between hysterical laughter and panic she glanced round the tables on the terrace. People were chatting and joking, beckoning her to come and join them. A scene would ruin everything they'd tried to accomplish that morning. She looked down at her arm. His fingers had made crush marks on her suede sleeve, and the sight suddenly sobered her.

'I don't have to explain anything,' she said furiously. 'What I did before we met has nothing to do with you.'

He was looking even more unreceptive, and in a frantic attempt to put some distance between them and the guests,

she started to walk away from the orangery, down through the garden towards the orchard, along a long path lined in the spring with a tunnel of laburnum, breaking into a run in her anxiety to get away.

His feet sounded on the flagstones beside her. He caught her arm again, and spun her round to face him.

'If you willingly chose to live with a prick like Adrian Greer that's your mistake. But you didn't tell me! That's what I don't like. Hadn't you ever considered that I might find out this way?'

She wrenched her arm free, and began to run again, stumbling in her high heels and entering another long walk where banks of dahlias bloomed, the vivid colours mingled like painting on Chinese porcelain. He caught up with her once more.

'How long did you live with him?' he demanded.

'Six months,' she said, rushing on through the yew arch at the end of the walk, and into the orchard.

The grass was long here, and the ground soft after overnight rain. Her heels stuck in the earth, and she came to a halt beneath one of the trees. Her back was against the trunk, her hands pressed against the rough bark. The wet grass clung damply round her ankles. All round them was the scent of rotting windfalls. Everything was going wrong so fast that she had no chance of thinking how to deal with him except by continuing to counter anger with anger.

'It meant nothing to me,' she said passionately, 'but you won't even try to understand.'

Munro, trying to read her face and wondering how much she really meant what she was saying, hated himself for not being able to control his jealousy. He had been feeling less and less confident of dealing with the relationship for weeks now, ever since their visit to the home. As his involvement with her had grown, so she seemed to become more immersed in the film and Gilead, and wrapped up

in her memories of Artemis. Her refusal to go to France with him, and her reluctance to let him make love to her in Artemis's room, had simply strengthened his suspicion that he might ultimately lose her.

'Six months! Christ, it's worse than I thought. And you slept with him, of course,' he said.

'What do you think?' she rapped back. 'And why not, anyway? You slept with Sabah, but I don't go on like an avenging angel about that.'

Her head was thrown back against the tree, her face pale, her eyes brilliant with anger. Everything he said was making the situation worse, yet he still couldn't stop himself.

'There's a difference. I loved her. Nothing you say could make me believe you loved Adrian Greer.'

'So you've always loved the women you've slept with? I don't believe it. You're trying to set up different rules for each of us.'

'I've loved the women I've lived with, and I've only lived with one other apart from Sabah.'

He hadn't meant to tell her that, but it did at least have the effect of slowing her down. She looked almost taken aback by the information. She was silent for a moment, and when she spoke again her voice was quieter.

'Why didn't you tell me? Who was she? I suppose you were married.'

'She was married, but not to me. Her husband was a hostage of the Shi-ites, the one I got out of jail in Beirut. It became fairly clear after a while that she still loved him. I had some good contacts among the Shi-ites, and decided to negotiate for his release in return for an article giving their side of the affair.'

'You lived with her, in those circumstances? How could you do it?'

'That's exactly the question I've just asked you. She

was lonely and scared, and I suppose I was too. It just happened. Everything was in such turmoil we managed to keep it quiet. Her husband never knew.'

'You can hardly accuse me of secrecy, then,' she said in a still lower voice. 'But I'm sorry. That must have been tough for you.'

The acknowledgement defused his anger. He knew he should try to offer a similar understanding, but something still drove him to keep questioning her.

'I didn't tell you because I didn't know how you'd take it. And it doesn't stop me wanting to know why you went to live with Greer.'

'People do stupid things sometimes,' she said, not looking at him, and speaking in a low, rapid voice. 'I regret it now – I loathed living with Adrian at the end – and it was the worst mistake I ever made. But when I first met him he seemed so glamorous, and he offered me the job I'd always wanted.'

'But couldn't you see what an operator he was? And you didn't need him. You're talented enough to have made it on your own.'

'It didn't seem like that at the time. I had so many good ideas no one would listen to, and I thought I'd never get the chance to use them. I didn't start out intending to sleep with him, but if I hadn't I'd have lost the job. I wouldn't do it again, but it's still not easy for women to get to the top, you know.'

Munro felt the most enormous relief that she hadn't loved Greer. That was the one thing he couldn't have taken. She was looking at him now with a mixture of wariness and hopeful longing which left him feeling as if he'd just successfully negotiated a street lined with snipers. He took her in his arms, and she gave a long sigh.

He rested his chin on her head, feeling as if he'd never let her go, yet still thinking furiously. If he wanted to keep

her, he knew he'd have to give up all thoughts of resuming his normal way of life. That would be hard enough, though he was willing to try. What he couldn't do was start out life together having to share her with Gilead and Artemis. The film-making was different – it was her career, an integral part of her – but if he made the difficult decision to give up war reporting, he wasn't then going to play second fiddle to a house and a ghost. He'd been waiting patiently all summer to see if she could somehow resolve the conflicts still left in her mind by her father's death, but he had an increasingly strong feeling that it wasn't going to be long enough. Neither with so many people around was this the right time or place to start a discussion about their future.

Saskia, equally weak with relief, wondered why he didn't speak. She was longing to ask him the one question which meant so much to her, whether he was going abroad again. She couldn't believe after this that he'd decide to leave her, but she still didn't quite dare ask him outright.

'So what are we going to do?' she said tentatively, echoing the same question he'd asked her in the spring. From the corner of her eye she could see Davina coming along the dahlia walk to tell them Adrian had gone. Munro caught the direction of Saskia's glance, and let her go. She saw that he looked relieved.

'Christ, I don't know,' he said, pushing his hands through his hair in a totally uncharacteristic gesture of indecision. 'But we can't talk about it now. Let's leave it till the party tomorrow.'

Chapter 16

Munro chatted for a few minutes to Davina, and then went to talk to some professional acquaintances. Saskia watched him anxiously as he listened with a stillness which they happily mistook for his undivided attention, but which she knew meant he was thinking of something else entirely.

It was hard trying to appear vivacious and unconcerned while she worried over whether he really had accepted her explanation of the Adrian affair. At the same time she was panicking over Adrian's next move. His hints had reinforced her suspicion that LeValet could be intent on some even more poisonous revenge. In the end she was glad when Munro left early, with only the briefest and most abstracted of goodbyes, kissing her as though his mind was still miles away, and saying casually that he'd see her at the party tomorrow.

The house was very busy next morning. Ben had just completed his second wave of cooking, and Freddy was cutting flowers to decorate the hall and drawing room, while Morwenna sat in the study updating her CV. Now the film was finished Saskia knew that to keep Morwenna in the company she'd have to come up with some irresistible proposition within the next week or two. Though she had several vague ideas for new programmes she'd been unable to give them the concentrated burst of creative thought needed to bring them to life. And it was impossible to concentrate now with the Munro dilemma hanging over her.

She felt exhausted and restless at the same time, and in an effort to do something useful started to dust and tidy the drawing room. The rugs had already been cleared from the floor for dancing, and she began to collect up the more fragile ornaments for removal to a safer place.

Ten minutes later she was gazing out over the garden, her duster idle and half the ornaments still to be cleared, thinking about Munro, when Miss Moxon appeared on the terrace with her bicycle. She had a large wicker basket hanging from the handlebar, which she brought into the room and set down on a window seat. With a flourish she removed a piece of plastic and a tea-towel to reveal layers of samosas, the crisp golden pastry freckled with flakes of pepper.

'For the party,' she said proudly. 'I know how much you all like them. I got my friend Mrs Gupta to make them for me. She's been at the stove since six.'

She delved into the pocket of her coat, an old riding mac smelling strongly of rubber.

'But I'm afraid you're not going to like this, my dear. Mr Gupta has a newspaper shop, and he showed me it this morning.'

She drew out a folded copy of the *Gorgon*, the most read and most sued of all the tabloids. It was stained with turmeric, and had obviously already been studied thoroughly in the Guptas' kitchen. Miss Moxon spread the paper open on the back of a sofa, flicked past the silicone nudes, and stopped at the gossip column.

Saskia reeled. There was a photo of her from an old Metropolis house magazine, taken at a Christmas party, looking distinctly dishevelled and wearing a low-necked dress which had been a big mistake at the time and looked like an even bigger mistake now. It was placed next to one of Munro which must have been taken some years back, possibly after the hostage rescue, looking impossibly

macho. Both photos were superimposed on a much larger picture of Gilead culled from a gardening magazine. The copy, under a headline 'Beirut hero in TV sex tangle', was far, far worse.

> Seems like independent TV producer Saskia Tyrrell, 26, lively lovely who only recently deserted another media couch, now has war photographer Munro Hawkshaw, hero of the Beirut siege, in tow. She's the great-niece of feminist idol Artemis Venner, notorious for the way she ditched Hollywood heart-throb Carl Sandstrom.
>
> Could be Saskia's a chip off the old block. Adrian Greer, acclaimed documentary maker for Metropolis, described last night how Saskia ran out on him after he'd given her a job on his team and taught her all he knew.
>
> 'I was temporarily devastated,' he said. 'She betrayed me emotionally and professionally. She even hijacked my idea for a film about Artemis Venner.'
>
> Everyone's hoping nice-guy Hawkshaw, whose Tigrean girlfriend was tragically killed last year, won't be given the push by Saskia too. But things are looking good for Adrian now. His block-buster bio-doc on the Venner/Sandstrom affair is set to break all viewing records when it's screened next week, and stars Tina Vane as Artemis. Those in the know say Saskia's rival low-budget production is already an also-ran.'

Saskia groaned, forcing herself to read on.

> Lucky lady Saskia now owns Artemis's famed

> Lutyens mansion, Gilead, in the most exclusive part of Bristol. She's been offered three-quarters of a million pounds for the property by local benefactor Gerald LeValet. 'I wanted to use it for the good of our homeless elderly in Bristol,' he said last night. 'Can it be right that one young girl should have so much when so many have so little?'

Saskia crushed the paper violently and threw it on the floor.

'It's all lies,' she said, her voice cracking with rage, 'and such bloody clever lies too.'

'I suppose you could sue,' said Miss Moxon doubtfully, 'but most of it's innuendo, and you've already got the legal expenses of the planning appeal.'

'Adrian knows damn' well I won't sue. I can't afford the money or the time, and the *Gorgon* nearly always wins its cases anyway. But I'll get him for this somehow. I'm going to show Morwenna.'

She scrabbled for the paper again, and rushed off to the study. Morwenna looked up enquiringly from the printer, which was rolling out copies of her updated CV. Saskia frantically smoothed out the newspaper, and spread it on the table by Morwenna's side.

'That creep Adrian! See what he's done!'

Morwenna read it slowly, consternation spreading over her face.

'Christ! This really is going to be a hard one to handle.'

'Do you think I don't know that?' stormed Saskia. 'And God knows how Munro'll take it.'

'Huh, he'll survive,' said Morwenna. 'The *Gorgon* obviously hasn't got it in for him, and he must be used to publicity by now. You should worry about yourself. You'd better make a press statement double quick. You must clear things up before our film's shown.'

'I'll phone Davina right away.'

'Be careful. The phone's still plugged into the answering machine, and I haven't checked the calls since yesterday afternoon. I bet the press'll be on to you the minute you switch over.'

Saskia played back the tape, leaving the phone off the hook. It was crammed with calls from gossip columnists imploring her to speak to them. She replaced the phone and instantly it rang. When she answered an excited voice from the *Gorgon* started hurling questions at her.

'No comment,' she yelled down the receiver, flinging it on the table and leaving it unconnected again. She turned to Morwenna. 'This is impossible already. I'll have to ring Davina from the box down the road.'

Standing in the stuffy booth, which smelt of old cigarette ends and was plastered with obscene felt pen messages, she prayed for Davina to be at home, and felt dizzy with relief when she heard her voice.

'Saskia! Thank heaven you called. Have you seen the *Gorgon*?'

'What do you think? What the hell can we do? I've got to stop them printing any more stuff like that.'

'Don't worry,' said Davina soothingly. Saskia could hear her crunching toast at the other end, and wondered how she could possibly be so calm. 'The Sunday tabloids have been queueing up for your statement. I've just sold it to the *Siren*. They made a massive bid, and they've sworn to be sympathetic. They're sending down a team to interview you this afternoon.'

'So soon!' said Saskia in alarm. 'But what'll I say?'

'The truth, of course, and ham it up as much as you can. Take the line that you're the original artistic innocent, and Adrian tried to ravish your integrity. Imply that he's jealous of your success, bad mouth his film as much as you can, hype your own, and wear something understated.

You're aiming at a Jane Eyre look, serious but a tiny bit sexy too.'

'What about LeValet?'

'Spill the beans on the connection between him and Adrian. And try to come across as an even bigger do-gooder. Say you intend to open the house to the public eventually, or set up a study centre.'

'But I don't,' said Saskia, in near despair over the impossibility of fulfilling all these instructions.

'You're not swearing anything on oath, for heaven's sake. Just say it's your dream for the future, or something vague of that sort.'

'And how on earth shall I deal with the Munro affair? That's going to be the hardest of all.'

Saskia heard Davina give a mischievous laugh.

'That'll be the easiest. Simply tell the truth.'

'But I can't. I don't know what the truth is.'

'For heaven's sake, I should have thought it was obvious The whole world loves a lover, so you've got the interview made. Just play it cool, and you'll be fine. I'm sure Munro will do the same. I've been trying to get a message through to him, but his phone's off the hook as well. I must go now, Sass. My other line's ringing again.'

By the time the reporter and photographer from the *Sunday Siren* turned up, Saskia was taut as a high wire with nervousness, too many cups of black coffee and no lunch. She'd rehearsed every question and answer she could think of, and even got Morwenna to take some Polaroids of her to make sure her dress was sober enough.

Luckily the team had spent the train journey in the bar, and they were already in a benevolent mood. The reporter had been let down badly in the past by a false publicity leak from Adrian, and listened with glee to Saskia's version of her departure from Metropolis.

'I'll be able to get the bastard at last,' he said, tucking into another piece of Ben's chocolate cake. 'I've been waiting for something like this for years. Now tell me about the film you're making – the word is that you're not too happy about Greer's version of Artemis Venner's story. Do you know where he's getting the money from for his spectacular?'

He was delighted with her revelations about Adrian's connections with LeValet, and feeling slightly more confident Saskia made herself deliver what sounded to her like a hugely inflated description of her own film.

'Great, I'll hype it to the skies,' he said pouring himself a whisky chaser from the bottle Saskia had left conveniently by the teapot. 'So all we need now is the lowdown on the Hawkshaw affair – and I do need to make it sound as juicy as I can.'

He caught sight of Saskia's expression and added hastily, 'But from your point of view, of course, and in the most tasteful way.'

Saskia, feeling sick at the thought of millions of people reading about her private life, took a deep breath, and gave an account of their friendship which made them sound like Mr Gladstone and Queen Victoria.

'Come on, darling, can't you give me a bit more than that? Do you plan to marry? Is he going to jack in war photography? Or are you going abroad with him?'

'Definitely not,' said Saskia desperately. 'Neither of us has the time for any deep involvement.'

'But are you in love?' the reporter persisted. 'You must answer that one. My editor'll kill me if you don't.'

'Does love really come into modern relationships?' said Saskia, frantically trying not to commit herself. 'Munro's made it very clear to me that his work means everything to him. I feel exactly the same about my career. There's no question of any kind of sacrifice by either of us. We simply

have a light-hearted friendship. I'm sorry, but I really can't say any more.'

'You don't make things very easy, darling,' said the reporter, regretfully flipping his notebook shut, and switching off his tape-recorder. 'Still, the readers'll love the stuff on how you met Sandstrom. I'll do the best I can for you, anyway.'

After that Saskia endured a long wrangle with the photographer, who seemed incapable at first of understanding that she had no intention of posing in her nightie. When she finally waved the team off in a taxi she felt as battered as a piece of over-used carbon paper.

At least the hall and drawing room looked wonderful. The white walls were decorated with vivid scarlet and indigo swathes of cloth brought back by Artemis from the Ivory Coast, held in place with carved wooden masks brought down from the gallery. A huge Delft vase by the stairs was crammed with shaggy white chrysanthemums, and the statue wore a necklace of rose hips which gleamed like sealing wax against the dark wood.

Freddy was swinging the polisher over the drawing-room floor for the last time with Jules staggering after her, while a DJ friend of Morwenna's set up a sound system. Ben, who'd been laying the long table for a buffet supper in the dining room next door, dragged Saskia off to the kitchen. She thought she couldn't eat anything, but after he'd forced a plate of scrambled eggs on her, and she'd had more coffee laced with brandy, she began to feel slightly livelier.

'Go and have a rest,' said Ben, who'd been hovering over her with a satisfied look as she ate. 'People won't start rolling up till nine at the earliest, and we can cope till you appear.'

She had a bath, and then lay on the bed for a long time in the dark, thinking about Artemis, and wondering how she'd managed to endure the hounding of the Hollywood

press. As always when she was extremely tired the sense of Artemis's presence in the room was very strong. She dozed for a while, drifting in and out of dreams in which it seemed as if she was really there, sitting just out of sight, but never quite attainable.

Eventually Saskia was roused by the sound of music filtering through the house. She grabbed the clock by the bed, saw it was almost nine, and realised she still hadn't decided what to wear.

When she went to the wardrobe all her party dresses looked uninspiring. In a fit of enthusiasm Laura, who'd offered to address the invitations, had surreptitiously added the words 'evening dress optional' to the cards, but she wasn't sure how many of the guests would run to that. Perhaps she should have accepted Laura's offer of something from the boutique after all. Idly she riffled through Artemis's gowns, not really considering them seriously until her eye was caught by a long drift of white chiffon.

She brought the dress out and took off its plastic cover, laying it carefully on the bed. She'd told herself again and again that she mustn't wear Artemis's clothes any more, but the beauty of the fabric and the faint scent of sandalwood rising from its folds brought Artemis to her so vividly that she had to try it on.

She threw off her wrap and stood naked except for her pants, easing the floating folds of the gown over her head. They fell like gossamer around her. She looked at herself in the mirror. The dress was almost backless, with a deep V neck. Rivulets of delicate silver embroidery streamed down from the shoulders over each breast, spreading into tiny spangled flowers across the skirt and banding the hem. It was like being clothed in moonlight. All Saskia's resolutions dissolved. She needed Artemis more than ever tonight. She had to wear it.

* * *

The throb of the music became louder as she went downstairs. Guests were crowding in through the front door, brandishing bottles of wine, and greeting each other with shrieks and kisses. She went into the drawing room, where the lights had been turned low, and people were sprawled on the sofas talking and watching the dancing. Everyone looked different tonight. It was the first time she'd seen Freddy in a dress, a green silk tunic which with her pale feathery hair made her look as fragile as a dandelion clock. She was dancing with Ben, very grand in a dinner jacket and a white brocade waistcoat. Morwenna, gyrating madly with Mike Ogden, wore metallic grey leggings with black thigh-length boots, and a black satin shirt. Mr Elder and Miss Moxon, clad in a regal gown of mauve beaded satin, were performing a quick-step which had nothing to do with the music.

The room was filling rapidly, people spilling out on to the terrace, where Chinese lanterns rescued from the attics were strung in bushes and trees. The noise of the music increased. Hired waiters in the dining room were dispensing wine as fast as they could get the corks out of the bottles. Saskia, trying to greet and dance with as many people as possible, felt strangely detached, almost as if she were the spirit of Artemis looking down on it all. She wasn't even worrying that Munro hadn't arrived. The noise became tremendous, and when she looked at her watch again it was almost midnight. People were starting to pillage the buffet, settling down with heaped plates of food, while a small band of fanatics still danced.

She wandered out into the hall, and Laura drifted up to her, svelte in a clinging sloe-coloured dress, with a choker of opals round her neck. Lately she'd begun to join in even more of the activities at Gilead, actually seeming to enjoy them. Saskia had caught her bathing Jules the other

day, blowing soap bubbles for him, and hardly noticing the splashes on her skirt.

'Come and talk to me,' Laura said. She drew Saskia down beside her on the stairs. 'Where did you find that fabulous dress? It's pure forties. It's a marvellous evening altogether, and I'm so proud of you. But where's Munro? He ought to be here too.'

Laura was smiling happily at her, looking as if her praise was really meant, obviously longing for Saskia to respond with equal warmth. But the reference to Munro simply made Saskia do what she'd been trying not to do all evening, and forced her at last to think the unthinkable. Maybe he wouldn't come at all, maybe the piece in the *Gorgon* had decided him to finish the relationship without even telling her, maybe he was at Heathrow even now, waiting for a plane to take him abroad again.

Angrily she snapped back at Laura, 'How should I know where he is? And I wish you'd stop going on as though we're an item. I've told you it's only a casual thing.'

'I'm not so sure about that,' said Laura maddeningly. 'I had such a nice little talk with him the other day in the garden. I told him all about your father and how I felt after he died. So odd, because I hadn't spoken about it for years.'

'For God's sake, Laura, do you always have to discuss me behind my back?'

'We weren't discussing you, we were discussing me,' said Laura in a wounded voice. 'He's a good listener. I've been thinking a lot lately about what went wrong between us when your father died, and I wonder now if I should have shared my feelings more with you.'

Laura was looking at her pleadingly, obviously wanting some cathartic psychological discussion which would make her feel less guilty. Saskia only just stopped herself shouting outright at her.

'I'm glad Munro understands someone,' she said bitterly. 'You'd better keep the heavenly violins for him, if he ever appears. They still don't persuade me.'

Laura was gazing at her like a wounded doe. Saskia got up and walked swiftly through the drawing room, skirting the dancers, out on to the terrace. In spite of the coolness of the air people were spilling along the paths, and wandering through the enclosed gardens. The lanterns, paper globes of light, swayed gently in the dark, and scraps of wispy cloud floated across the face of the moon.

She came to the steps which led down to the rill, and then, looking back into the lighted drawing room, saw Munro talking to Freddy. He was wearing a light linen suit, a sight so unexpected that Saskia almost didn't recognise him. Freddy gestured towards the terrace. Saskia saw him come through the doors and look round. She instantly panicked at the thought of talking to him among so many people, and fled down the steps, hoping to draw him away.

Munro caught sight of Saskia just as she disappeared. He followed, and saw her walking towards a small pool halfway down the rill. She'd put up her hair, and her dress, which had a vaguely old-fashioned look he couldn't quite place, shimmered as she moved. She seemed unlike herself, as insubstantial as moonlight on water.

She stopped at the edge of the pool and waited for him. He felt disturbingly unsure of himself. He took her hand and she smiled tentatively at him. She was substantial enough now, and only too alluring. The few constructive thoughts he'd had since yesterday were disappearing fast.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'Sorry for putting you through that heavy scene at the launch. But we do still have to talk, you know.'

'I know,' she said in a small voice. 'But I'd much rather

not. And you must know what was in the *Gorgon* today – why didn't you ring me?'

She looked pale and tense, and again he felt the angry frustration he'd experienced that morning at being unable to protect her from the press.

'Dan phoned and told me about it,' he said. 'He had all the tabloids after him for a statement. I couldn't get through to you, and I didn't want to come round in case the press were staking you out and caught us both. In the end Dan did a deal with the *Siren*, and I gave them an interview late this afternoon. They told me they'd seen you as well. We'll just have to hope we said roughly the same thing.'

'The bastards! They never told me they were going to see you as well. What did you say?'

'You'll be flattered, I hope,' he said. 'You'll have to read it and see, won't you?'

'How can you joke about it?' she demanded.

'Because it's the only way to deal with something like that. Come into the house now. It's too cold out here.'

When they walked into the drawing room it was quieter. The DJ had stopped playing techno-rave, and Sting was singing 'Every Step You Take'.

'I've never danced with you before,' he said, and took her in his arms again.

She began slowly to relax as they circled the room, and he felt the tension leaving her body. The music created a private world of sound about them. He wondered what to do when it ended. He had to talk to her alone, but the house was overflowing with people. He wished he didn't have to speak to her at Gilead at all, because he always felt the place somehow imposed a restraint on her, as if it was competing for her attention.

The track came to an end. She looked bemused, as if she'd just woken up.

'Can we go somewhere quieter?' he said.

'There are people everywhere,' she answered doubtfully. 'But maybe upstairs – my room – if you don't mind.'

The sound of the party faded into the background as they entered Saskia's bedroom and the door closed behind them. The wind was rising outside, whispering in the branches of the cedar tree and moving the curtains at the open window. Munro's mind automatically registered the odd mixture of light thrown by the shifting glow from the lanterns and the pallid rays of the declining moon. The tapestry bellied slightly from the wall as it was caught by the breeze, and the huntsmen and all their train seemed momentarily to come to life.

Saskia sat down on the window seat, and he faced her from the other end. He longed to make love to her, and then try to tell her what he wanted afterwards, but that wouldn't be fair. He wasn't even entirely sure that it would work. He longed almost as much for a very stiff drink.

'The paper liked my last state of Britain piece,' he said conversationally.

'Good,' she answered.

'The editor's keen for me to take on something else now.'

'Oh,' she said. Her voice had almost disappeared.

'He wants me to go back to Somalia. He thinks American troops may be involved there soon. And I saw Anna as well. She asked me to take some shots of the refugees for a Christmas fund-raising campaign.'

'So what will you do?' she asked, clasping one arm defensively across her breast.

'That depends on you,' he said.

He came nearer and took her free hand. It was cold and lay unresponsively in his.

'I'll give up war photography,' he said. 'I'll do it willingly. I can find enough work without it, and there are always commercial assignments if the worst comes to the worst. But you have to give up something too.'

'My own work?' She visibly flinched as she said the words.

'No, of course not. You'd only be half a person without it, I know. I couldn't do that to you. But I don't think I can share you with Gilead, not at first, at any rate.'

'You mean you want me to *sell* Gilead?' She was staring at him as if he'd told her she'd got to have some possibly fatal operation. 'I can't. LeValet would make sure he got hold of it if I did.'

'No, not sell Gilead. Of course I'd never ask you to give it up entirely. But you must know in your heart of hearts that in a way it'll always belong to Artemis. Because of that I don't think it's good for you to live here indefinitely, not at the moment anyway. Perhaps because of the film, perhaps because you still haven't really got over your father's death, you're beginning to over-identify with her.'

Saskia looked at him suspiciously.

'Laura's been talking to you, hasn't she? She's always been jealous of Artemis. She never wanted me to live here.'

'I talked to Laura a little, yes,' he said patiently. 'I think she's realising more and more what she lost when she withdrew from you. It might help you both if you tried to see things her way sometimes.'

Saskia hardly seemed to have heard his last words. She got up and began to walk about the room, her dress shimmering in the dim light.

'But Gilead's good,' she said passionately. 'Can't you feel how good it is? And what you say about Artemis isn't true. She and my father loved me so much. No one's loved me as they did.'

'I do,' he said. 'All you have to do is let go and trust me instead.'

She paused in front of him, one hand on the ebony bed post, the muslin curtain moving behind her in a breath of wind.

'You never said you loved me before,' she said.

'I wasn't really sure till now. You're the first woman I've made love to after Sabah. I had to be certain it wasn't just some passing reaction.'

'But not to live at Gilead,' she said slowly. 'Do you know what you're asking me to give up? Couldn't we just stay here to start with?'

'Especially not to start with,' he answered. 'It wouldn't work. It wouldn't seem like our own home. I know how much you love it, but everything's imprinted with Artemis's personality.'

She still seemed completely unconvinced as he heard himself blundering on.

'Of course we could come and stay here from time to time, later on, when we'd made our own life together. Perhaps you could even begin to think of sharing it a little, maybe letting the public into the garden for a few days each week. And what about all the scholars who want to use Artemis's archives? I hate to say it, but in his own twisted way LeValet has a point there.'

She was looking more and more distressed.

'I know I ought to open the garden, I know that's reasonable. But it's ridiculous to say I'm influenced by Artemis to such an extent. How do I know you're not using it as an excuse to get me away from here?'

'If you really believe I'd do that, there's hardly any point in going on anyway,' he said.

He felt increasingly sure that he was going to lose the argument and in desperation began to kiss her, pulling the combs from her hair, trying to make her seem less remote.

He buried his face in the hollow of her neck, and as he caught a breath of the perfume which had clung to her last time in this room he knew instantly why the dress looked so old-fashioned. He wanted to say something about it, but she was beginning to respond and instead he began to feel for the back of her dress. The row of tiny fabric-covered buttons was fiendishly difficult to undo, and for a moment he fumbled. The pause was fatal.

She stiffened, and said, 'I can't. Not here. Anywhere but here.'

The dress was already slipping off one shoulder, and in the strange light her skin was almost luminous. A deep violet shadow lay between her breasts. He felt hopelessness overwhelm him.

'I don't want a ghost, I want you,' he shouted at her. 'You say you're not obsessed by Artemis, yet you're wearing her clothes now. You won't even let me make love to you here. Artemis and Gilead are taking over your life.'

'It's not true,' she answered, shrinking away from him, inching back across the bed.

He grabbed her by the shoulders.

'Fucking well prove it, then.'

He fumbled again with the back of the dress. All at once it seemed to be a symbol of everything that stood in the way of their happiness. He wrenched angrily at the fastening. The material was old and fragile, and came away in his grasp, tearing from shoulder to waist.

Saskia, feeling as if she was in some waking nightmare, her eyes tightly closed to keep back her tears and shut out his angry face, felt cold air pour across her breasts. The shock unsealed her eyes. They went frantically to Munro. He was standing by the bed, staring at the material in his hand.

'What the hell was I going to do?' he said slowly. 'Christ, I can't take much more of this.'

The expression on his face was one of stoic despair, the same expression she'd seen when he first talked to her about Sabah's death, but this time she'd put it there. Wordlessly she held out her arms. He came to her like a drowning man, pushing away the remnants of the dress, scattering his own clothes on the floor, almost devouring her with his lovemaking. For a little while nothing else mattered.

She woke at dawn. Munro lay beside her, one brown arm flung across the pillow, his face turned towards her, defenceless in sleep, the harsh lines gone. At the very end it had been a night of love-making so intense, so tender, that surely he wouldn't leave her now. She sat up cautiously, trying not to disturb him. Artemis's dress lay on the floor like a dragonfly's discarded wings. She left the bed and wrapped herself in her dressing gown, shivering in the dawn air. Silently on bare feet she went to the window.

The light was increasing every second. The lawns and hedges were white with the first frost, and a clump of maples at the edge of the garden had burst into flame overnight. The seasons came and went, but nothing ever really changed at Gilead. It was always itself. She leaned her head against the heavy silk curtain, placed her hand on the solid silvery oak of the window ledge, and ran her fingers over the cold wrought iron of the latch. Everything was reassuringly familiar and substantial, and she was even more certain that she could never give it up.

Impulsively she went back to the bed and knelt by Munro, laying her face against his and breathing in the smell of his skin. He stirred and opened his eyes. She leaned over him. Her wrap dropped from her shoulders. He put one hand behind her head, caressing the line of her neck.

'Munro,' she said, 'don't ask me again to give up Gilead. Not yet.'

His hand fell away. His eyes searched hers, his face became guarded, and suddenly he was fully alert. He sat up, flinching as the cold air hit his unprotected skin. She knelt back on her heels, gazing at him.

'Supposing I told you I couldn't give up war reporting yet? It's equally important to me,' he answered.

'But this is different. Gilead isn't dangerous.'

'I think it is.'

'How can you say that after the way we've just made love? You asked me to prove it, and I have. Don't you believe now that we could be happy together at Gilead?'

'You still don't understand, do you?' he said gently. 'The love-making was perfect, but not what led up to it. That happened because of the different ways in which we feel about Gilead, and that hasn't altered.'

'But if you'd only try living here, things would change. I'm certain they would,' she said.

'If I came to live at Gilead things wouldn't change in the right way.'

'But I love you,' she said imploringly. 'You must believe me.'

'More than your father and Artemis and Gilead? I don't think so. You may find some other man to live with you and them, but that's not for me.'

She knew now that he was going to leave her. She could hardly believe it, but mixed in with the crushing prospect of losing him was a guilty relief that she'd no longer have to fight her terror of leaving Gilead – guilty because it was almost like saving her own life at the expense of someone else's.

He carefully folded the two sides of the dressing gown over her breasts, took the belt and slowly knotted the ends together.

'I thought I'd lay the ghost as well as you,' he said with a slight smile, 'but I didn't succeed.'

The joke made her realise more than anything how much she'd miss him.

'Just give me a month longer, only a month. Till the film's shown, and I know the outcome of the inquiry. I can't decide anything now.'

He shook his head.

'Nothing would alter, and you know it.'

He got up and began to dress rapidly. When he'd finished he stuffed his tie into his pocket, and stood looking down at her where she sat huddled on the side of the bed.

'I can't believe you're finishing it like this,' she said. 'I can't believe you could be so cold-blooded.'

'This is the only way I can do it and not fall apart. Tell the lawyer you've briefed for the inquiry to get in touch with Dan beforehand. I've still some work to do on the LeValet exposé, but I'll send it on to Dan and he'll arrange for it to be published at the best possible time. I don't suppose you'll need to get in touch about anything else, but Dan always has a contact number.'

He touched her hair briefly.

'Be happy at Gilead,' he said, and was gone.

Chapter 17

'My CV's still no good,' said Morwenna, tossing a pile of updated copies into the wastepaper basket in the study. 'It's got as much charisma as a spaghetti western. I've decided to give it a complete rework.'

Saskia was sitting on the other side of the desk, supposedly addressing the glossy mail-shots giving the date and time of the film's transmission. She looked far from glossy herself. She was wearing a faded track suit, her hair was scraped back into an elastic band, and she appeared to be in a trance. Morwenna gave an exasperated sigh. Saskia had been like this for three days now, ever since Sunday, when she'd appeared at breakfast looking as if she'd spent the night in the arms of Dracula, and announced that she and Munro had split up.

'What do you think, Sass?' Morwenna raised her voice, determined to get a response. 'How about that colour shot of me on the roof at the prison, filming the riot, A4 size, plus an inset of the pic you took of me and Carl, and the actual CV superimposed in white using an acetate. That'd look great, wouldn't it?'

'Great,' said Saskia. She picked up the previous Sunday's *Siren*, which was folded open at the gossip column, and began to read it yet again. Morwenna could have hit her with it.

'Did you sleep at all last night?' she demanded. 'You are an idiot. You'll end up with total burn-out if you carry on like this.'

'I'm all right,' said Saskia listlessly.

Morwenna felt her patience, already severely tried, disappearing like a loose end of rewound film.

'Why don't you throw away that ridiculous paper, and start thinking about something important? You made the decision to stay here, after all, and life does go on. I warned you this would happen ages ago.'

'I know all that,' said Saskia. 'I just didn't think it would hurt so much.'

Morwenna decided the time had come for some shock treatment. She delved into the desk drawer for the invaluable whisky bottle, and poured them each a large tot. Saskia started to drink hers like medicine instead of the best Famous Grouse.

'Look, Sass,' Morwenna said, feeling as if she was trying to get through to some particularly thick technician, 'I can't hang around like this much longer, waiting for you to produce some new ideas. When I've got my CV sorted out, I'm sending it to Colossus in LA. If I time it to coincide with the American showing of the film, and ask Carl to put in another good word for me, the company there might offer me an assignment. If they don't I'll go over on spec anyway.'

Morwenna didn't think it was possible for Saskia to become any paler, but she did, though at least she seemed to have taken in what was being said to her.

'You mean stay in California for good?'

'For a few years at any rate. That's where the money is these days. I'm fed up with having to count pennies every time I have a great idea. And I'd like to get into movies eventually – maybe even do some directing myself.'

Saskia now looked as if she was going to cry. It might be a good thing, Morwenna thought. She didn't appear to have shed a tear since Munro left. But instead she held out her cup for more whisky. Morwenna splashed

in another generous tot. Perhaps getting her drunk would be just as good.

Saskia seemed to be taking twice as long as usual to think, but eventually she said, 'I'm sorry. I know I'm a dead loss at the moment, but I will snap out of it, I promise. California, though. It's such a long way away. And what about Ben ?'

'He can come too. He'd love LA and all those multi-cultural eateries.'

The expression on Saskia's face was making Morwenna feel still more of a heel. She hated this sort of situation.

'You know I'll stay if you can come up with something really good for your next project.'

'Will you give me another week or two?' said Saskia.

'I said I'd stick around till our film's shown, but not a moment longer.'

'Won't you even stay for the inquiry? It won't be long now.'

'I can't stay here sympathising with you indefinitely. That sort of thing's for losers. And you're not a loser either, Sass. This is so unlike you.'

'I've lost Munro,' Saskia said.

'You didn't lose him. It was your choice, and now you have to forget him. How often must I tell you? Look, why don't you come to LA too? You need some new input, and I'm sure you'd find backing there, especially with Carl's help. Just wait till the inquiry's over, find an agent to look after the company business, and take off into the sunset.'

'You know I can't do that. If you'd asked me nine months ago I'd have said yes like a shot. But Gilead means too much to me now. Even if LeValet loses his appeal he'll probably take the case on to the high court.'

'You'd have plenty of time for a preliminary trip to the

States before a high court hearing. This place is taking you over. Life's too short to waste on a house.'

'Gilead isn't just any house.'

'I know that, but it's not a good enough reason to embalm yourself permanently here. Artemis didn't, after all. And Freddy and Alicia are quite capable of looking after the house and garden while you're away.'

Saskia looked unconvinced. Morwenna finally decided she might as well save her breath. It was obviously a losing battle, and she didn't intend to be a casualty as well. Once you started feeling too responsible for people and things you were well and truly tied down.

'Anyway, I've got things to do, even if you haven't,' she said briskly. 'I'm going to the dark room to work on the CV. I'll see you at lunch-time.'

Saskia didn't move after Morwenna had gone. She'd never thought Munro's departure would affect her so severely, but the whisky was at least making it possible to remember him without the bludgeoning pain of the last few days. What made it so much worse was that it was self-inflicted. That was why she hadn't let herself cry. To do so would have seemed like self-pity, and she was trying desperately to cling to the last shreds of her confidence. She was still sure she'd done the right thing, but if it was right why didn't she feel happier?

She poured herself some more whisky and drank it down in two gulps. The alcohol was beginning to make her feel sleepy. Perhaps after a nap she'd be able to think constructively about her next project. She picked up the copy of the *Siren*, and made her way upstairs.

Jules, in a padded scarlet suit, was chasing a ball with Freddy on the lawn below the bedroom window. He tottered about among the fallen leaves until he predictably tripped over his own feet. His mouth began to form a howl,

but Freddy snatched him up and covered him with kisses before he had a chance to cry.

The intimacy of the scene made Saskia feel even more desolate. She turned away and sat down on the bed, spreading the copy of the *Siren* on the coverlet. Her eyes skimmed the piece about herself, which made her sound as though she had it all, but at least hyped the film satisfactorily, then fell on the interview with Munro. There was a photo of him in his old jacket with the collar turned up, standing with the dog on the bank of the river, his hair ruffled by the breeze.

It was clear that the reporter had been forced to dig hard. He'd written a brief resumé of Munro's past career which could have been culled from any cuttings library, and padded it out with a lyrical description of the farm. Munro himself had somehow managed to say very little until the final words of the piece which she now knew by heart.

> Munro wouldn't talk about the tragic death of his Tigrean girlfriend – I got the impression it was still a very private matter – though he did tell me a little about his involvement with Saskia Tyrrell.
>
> 'I've the greatest admiration for her, professionally and personally. But she's on her way to the top, and we've different priorities in different continents. It's going to be difficult for our friendship to develop into something more than a passing interlude, much as I'd like it to.'

As usual the words turned like a gouge in her heart. While she was still full of Dutch courage she decided she was never going to read them again. She scrumpled the paper into a ball, and flung it on to the heap of cedar cones in the fireplace. She fumbled in a drawer, found her cigarette

lighter, and put a flame to the paper. It flared up at once. A mass of tiny sparks twinkled on the sooty fireback, and the cones began to sputter behind the guard, giving off a sharp resiny scent.

As she watched the flames she began to feel overwhelmingly drowsy. She went back to the bed and lay down, staring at the carvings on the canopy. For the hundredth time since Munro had left she tried to summon up Artemis's presence. Still nothing happened. Gilead was exactly the same, but Artemis just wasn't there any more. As she felt sleep overtake her, she told herself that it was simply something else she'd have to learn to do without.

Adrian's film was scheduled for transmission that evening. At eight o'clock they were all gathered in front of the television in the drawing room. A westerly gale had been roaring all afternoon. Rain spattered the window panes beyond the drawn curtains, and every now and then blew down the chimney and hissed on to the fire.

Laura had insisted on joining them. She'd spent the earlier part of the week in London, and didn't know Saskia had broken with Munro. But it was evident that she guessed something was wrong, for she kept gazing at Saskia in a puzzled way.

Freddy wasn't herself, either. Jules had an earache, and for most of the day his wails had rivalled the crying of the wind. Morwenna, trying unsuccessfully not to show her irritation, had immured herself in the dark room, while Ben concocted soothing drinks and invalid food which Jules promptly threw up. At teatime the doctor finally arrived, and prescribed an anti-biotic. It was now eight o'clock, and Jules was sleeping at last, pillowed on Freddy's breast, his cheek scarlet on the side of his afflicted ear.

Saskia, who'd slept undisturbed for several hours and

now felt considerably better, wondered how Freddy found the stamina to cope day after day.

'Let me have Jules for a bit,' she said.

She leaned over and took him as Morwenna switched on the television. Freddy smiled gratefully and stretched. Jules didn't stir, apart from burrowing his face into Saskia's sweater, and twining his hand in her hair.

The screen sprang into life. A coffee advertisement ran its forty-second course, and was followed by Metropolis's logo of Nelson's column illuminated against a night sky. A link-man said a few bland words, and the documentary began at last. Adrian's customary opening credit, 'An Adrian Greer Production', appeared, superimposed over a long shot of waves crashing on the beach at Big Sur, and accompanied by torrents of Wagnerian music. The title burst on to the screen, 'To Love and Be Wise'.

'How corny can you get?' said Morwenna, hooting with laughter. 'Pure Frankie and Johnny.'

'Troilus and Cressida actually,' said Saskia, and felt a smile creeping up on her for the first time in days. 'He's got the quote wrong as well, and I'm sure that title's been used before.'

The camera zoomed in to a Lutyens house which looked nothing like Gilead, and possessed a garden resembling a municipal park. The music faded to Tina Vane saying in a voice like toffee sauce, 'Never were there nights like ours. I treasured every one.' Saskia began to feel hysterical with angry amusement at the sheer awfulness of it all.

The scene dissolved to a bedroom interior in forties Hollywood-style. Tina and Adrian's young male discovery, who had all the obvious charms of a pub stripper, writhed naked among the midnight blue satin sheets of a huge circular bed.

'I bet Adrian researched that scene himself first,' Saskia said, shaking with laughter as the discovery pounded away.

'Shh,' said Laura reprovingly, her eyes glued to the screen. 'It's absolutely disgusting.'

The rest of the film followed on much the same lines, with almost total emphasis on the love story, hardly mentioning Artemis's academic achievements, and hamming up the sentiment to incredible heights. Adrian had even shot a love scene in the surf at Big Sur cribbed straight out of *From Here to Eternity*. And a good part of the footage showing the so-called Gilead was tied in firmly with LeValet's plans to incorporate it into his empire.

With characteristic inaccuracy Adrian had finished the film with Tina Vane as Artemis waving goodbye to Carl from the steps of a Pan-Am clipper, her blonde hair blowing in the wind and a couple of glycerine tears rolling down her cheeks. Artemis's subsequent work in Africa wasn't referred to at all.

'How camp can you get?' said Ben, as the final credits scrolled over the screen, Adrian's name appearing yet again with a two-second hold and the rest rushing illegibly by, apart from an effusive acknowledgement to help given by the LeValet Foundation.

Saskia was thinking with deep relief that at least Adrian hadn't managed by some fluke, as he occasionally did, to pull off a programme which was truthful as well as exciting.

'The worst part was the way it implied there was nothing else in Artemis's life apart from the relationship with Carl,' she said.

'He's going to hate it,' said Freddy. 'Do you think he'll sue?'

'Resurrecting the affair would probably be too much for him to face,' said Saskia. 'Adrian must be gambling on that. You can't libel the dead, so he can safely say almost anything about Artemis. We'll just have to hope

our film puts the record straight. And I'll write to all the TV magazines pointing out exactly what a travesty it is. Davina could do a press release as well.'

'It's sure to get high viewing figures, though,' said Morwenna. 'A good dollop of slump-time sex always goes down well.'

They went on discussing the film until the advertisements ended and the titles for Metropolis's nine o'clock news began to roll.

'Don't switch off,' said Laura. 'There may be something about the royals.'

Saskia was miles away, concocting her letter to the press, and hardly aware of the television screen where scenes of ghastly and only too familiar carnage in some foreign street battle were being shown, when Freddy said excitedly, 'Look! Isn't that Munro?'

She was instantly jolted back to the news. The flickering figures at once took on an immense significance.

An impromptu press conference was taking place in a derelict house in Mogadishu, where a visiting first world politician stood on a platform of empty food crates trying to justify his country's lack of effective aid to the refugees. The press listened with weary cynicism as the Metropolis correspondent, whom Saskia knew and respected, was repeatedly fobbed off with soft answers. Then the news editor cut to a shot of Munro, in a flak jacket, with his camera round his neck, lounging against a wall pock-marked with bullets. He proceeded to fire off a series of questions which left the politician floundering and effectively self-condemned.

'Wow, he's lethal,' said Freddy admiringly.

Saskia felt as if she'd been caught in a shock wave that was all the more severe for hitting her just when she was starting to feel a little better. Jules sensed something was wrong. He began to stir and whimper. Morwenna gave him

an exasperated look, and Freddy leaned over and took him back into her arms. Saskia leaped up and abruptly switched off the television.

'But I was still watching,' complained Laura. 'And what's Munro doing out there? He didn't tell me he was going away when I saw him at the party.'

'He's doing exactly what he wants, like most men,' said Morwenna.

'Darling, I'm so sorry,' Laura said to Saskia. 'That's why you're looking so wretched. I knew something was wrong. What a shame he had to leave you. He was such a delightful person.'

'He didn't leave me,' said Saskia through clenched teeth. 'It was a mutual decision. We don't all plan our lives round the male sex.'

Laura reddened.

'If you're referring to me, that's not fair. Haven't I been living away from Ralphie for eight months now? You're so unforgiving in your judgements, Saskia.'

'And you're so bloody insensitive! Let's just drop the whole subject.'

Saskia saw Freddy and Ben exchange glances. Morwenna was about to leap to her defence, and Laura would then burst into tears and demand apologies and sympathy. She couldn't stand any more. She got up abruptly and walked out into the hall.

Away from the drawing-room fire the air was cold. Rain still beat dismally against the windows. The chrysanthemums in the Delft vase were beginning to wilt. Saskia stood at the foot of the stairs, gazing at the face of the statue, but there was no consolation there either. She leaned against the carved newel post, trying to erase the image of Munro from her mind, trying not to think of the flak jacket and the bullet-marked wall, telling herself she refused to miss him any more.

Freddy came out of the drawing room with Jules squirming in her arms. She shut the door behind her.

'I'm taking him up for a bath,' she said. 'It might make him feel better. Poor little thing – being a baby must be hell sometimes. Giant grown-ups bossing you about, and not being able to tell them how you feel.'

'Pretty good hell for a mother too, sometimes,' said Saskia, thinking guiltily that she'd hardly thought about anyone else except herself for days now.

Jules, now looking remarkably lively, grabbed at the rope of wooden beads Saskia was wearing. She slipped them over her head and let him play with them while she talked to Freddy.

'Sass,' said Freddy awkwardly, 'I'm sorry about Munro. You looked wiped out when you saw him just then on the telly. I do know a little bit how you feel. It seemed like the end of the world when I knew I wouldn't see Jules's father again. I'm sorry things didn't work out for you either.'

'Better than finding out later on when it'd have been even more difficult to part. Christ, what a platitude. That's the sort of thing Laura would say. But it's true, all the same.'

Freddy looked thoughtful.

'He was nice, though. And I don't think Laura would have said that. She liked him.'

'She liked Adrian too,' said Saskia bitterly.

'Honestly, she's not as bad as you think, Sass. She's changed since she started helping out at Gilead. She can be quite a nice old thing sometimes, and she loves Jules. That's more than my step-mother does. She's a right cow, won't even have him in the house.'

Jules suddenly became tired of the necklace. Freddy rescued it, and handed it back to Saskia.

'I'd better take him off before Morwenna complains about the crying again. She's up to here with him today.

And I reckon you'll feel better once the inquiry's over. It's been hanging over you for so long now.'

Autumn drew to an end with another flurry of rainstorms, and the day of the inquiry finally arrived. The last leaves were being torn from the trees as Saskia and Ben dashed across College Green towards the Council House. Morwenna had stayed at Gilead to work on some last minute publicity photos.

A couple of pigeons were sheltering from the rain on the shoulders of the statue which stood beneath the high domed entrance porch. They arrived in the marble-floored foyer with dripping umbrellas, letting in gusts of rain through the door.

John Burnet, who was to represent Saskia at the proceedings, sat in one of the red easy chairs in the waiting area, reading a sheaf of papers balanced on a brief case. By his side were half a dozen copies of the *Clarion*, the most liberal of the broadsheets, neatly folded and tied with red tape.

He got up and shook their hands. He was in his late-thirties, a stocky man with a very English collection of nondescript features and his hair in a conventional cut with a tuft sticking up at the back. He wore an equally nondescript suit, perfectly adequate but light years from Armani. Saskia had worried about him at first, knowing that LeValet would probably wheel on some glamorous London lawyer. But John Burnet was highly recommended by everyone. He lived in Bath, and specialised in conservation cases. Ben had originally suggested him to Saskia. In the face of huge odds he'd got off the protestors who'd been arrested at the motorway demonstration. Even Mr Elder had conceded that John Burnet was good.

'Well,' he said, 'we've an interesting morning ahead of

us. I hear LeValet's briefed Neville Parkes. His firm's in Mayfair, and he specialises in taking the high moral ground. We must be ready for any eventuality. But at least we have our secret weapon.'

He patted the bundle of newspapers.

'Have you seen the *Clarion* today, Miss Tyrrell? Hawkshaw's exposé's been published at last.'

Saskia was astounded. Munro's agent had scarcely heard from him since he left for Somalia, and she'd decided that he'd lost interest.

'Like you I was beginning to think it wouldn't appear at all, even though Hawkshaw's agent kept assuring me he was trying to get some extra information in East Africa about LeValet's drugs racket,' John said. 'Apparently it only went through to the newspaper a couple of days ago. It's strong stuff, pretty unpleasant really, and I'd prefer not to use it unless it's absolutely necessary. Let's see if we can win without it first.'

'Can I see?' asked Saskia eagerly.

'I'd rather you didn't. It'll add to the strength of our case if you appear to know nothing about it. I'm sure Hawkshaw's material is cast iron, but if LeValet sues for libel I don't want you involved.'

He looked at his watch.

'Shall we go in? It's almost ten o'clock, and I saw the inspector arrive some time ago.'

They walked down a curving corridor to a long committee room whose windows looked over the leaf-strewn green to the cathedral. It was an impressive place, panelled with limed oak, the ground-length sash windows hung with tapestry curtains in muted browns and reds. At the far end, above a marble fireplace, hung the city's coat of arms, a pair of golden unicorns supporting a shield painted with a ship and castle. Four massive oak tables had been placed in an open square surrounded by leather-backed chairs.

At the near end, facing the tables, were several lines of chairs for the public. In the back row the local press were already busy scribbling on notepads.

John Burnet sat down with Saskia and Ben at the front of the public seats.

'We'll move up to the table when we're presenting our case,' he whispered.

The inspector adjudicating at the inquiry, a tall white-haired man with enough gravitas for three judges, was already in a seat beneath the coat of arms. On his right were the Council's solicitor and an official from the planning department. But Saskia's eyes were drawn inexorably to the opposite side of the square, where LeValet sat, taking off a long black overcoat. He'd become almost monster-like in her mind, yet there he was, looking perfectly normal after all. Normal, that was, until he turned his head in her direction, and shot her a glance of pure venom that made her stomach churn.

Neville Parkes sat by his side, his eyes darting round the room. He was a dapper man with a long inquisitive nose, who sat doodling with a gold pen while he waited for the proceedings to begin.

The inspector started on the stroke of ten with a scrupulously fair presentation of the cases for the Council, and for LeValet, the appellant.

'I shall now proceed to take appearances,' he said. 'That is, to note down the names of the advocates and any witnesses they may wish to call, and of members of the public who would like to speak.'

The Council's solicitor and Neville Parkes had their say, several other Clifton residents gave in their names from the public seats, and then John took the floor.

'My name is John Burnet, of the practice of Burnet and Wilson, Great Pulteney Street, Bath, and I appear as the advocate of Miss Saskia Tyrrell who owns a property

known as Gilead, adjoining the proposed development area. I shall call her as a witness.'

The inspector appeared to know John, for he smiled at him. 'Very well, Mr Burnet. You and your client will have your chance to speak after the two principal parties.'

Saskia hadn't realized how detailed and thorough the proceedings would be. But though the inquiry proceeded at an infuriatingly slow unbroken pace for the next two hours, it soon became clear that LeValet's proposal was anathema to the city council, whose solicitor and planning officer patiently demolished every objection raised by Neville Parkes. Long involved references to sub-sections of planning acts and local by-laws flew back and forth across the tables as they brought up the questions of over-density, the strain on existing public resources, and the architectural unsuitability of the proposed building.

The room was extremely warm, and the windows appeared to be hermetically sealed. People were starting to shuffle about restlessly in the seats behind Saskia. Her concentration began to falter until John suddenly nudged her.

'LeValet's losing fast,' his voice said encouragingly in her ear. 'He'll have to produce something pretty good to counteract all this. And it's our turn in a moment. I'm just about to be called.'

They went to the table together and sat down facing the inspector. Even with John's reassuring presence next to her Saskia didn't like being so close to LeValet. She could almost feel the malevolence in his gaze.

'Now, Mr Burnet,' said the inspector. 'May we hear your client's objections to the appellant's proposals?'

John launched into a breathtakingly effective case for maintaining Gilead's surroundings in a suitably sympathetic style. He quoted a long eulogy from Pevsner on the architectural glories of the building, and produced

some particularly damning library photos of the exteriors of other Happy Valley homes.

'And Mr LeValet has already shown his true colours,' he concluded. 'The trees shown on his plan, exceptionally beautiful mature beeches, which were the subject of preservation orders, have already been cut down. It's clear that regulations mean nothing to him where his interests are concerned.'

Neville Parkes, caught on the wrong foot, hurriedly consulted LeValet, and eventually came up with a vague statement about the trees being rotten which impressed no one. The inspector, after a tart remark about wasting time with undocumented evidence, dismissed Parkes and called Saskia to the top table to take the oath. She had to pass behind LeValet on the way, and the scent of his hair oil made her feel sick.

'Now, Miss Tyrrell,' the inspector said with a paternal smile when she'd returned to her place, 'take your time, and don't be nervous.'

It was a counsel of perfection. She was taut with anxiety as she took up her notes. But by forcing herself to think of Gilead alone, and its importance to herself, to Artemis, to everyone, she ultimately managed to present a case that surprised her with its confident coherence. There was even applause, hastily suppressed by the inspector, from the public seats.

'And there are so many other people throughout the country and abroad who feel about the house and garden as I do,' she concluded. 'Anything that detracts from Gilead detracts from our national heritage.'

'Well done,' John whispered as she sat down.

'Do you wish to ask any questions, Mr Parkes?' the inspector asked.

Neville Parkes, who had been drawing an immensely complicated maze on his brief, rose and fixed Saskia

with a penetrating stare. He was looking worryingly like a ferret about to go for the throat of some unsuspecting mouse.

'You are very insistent on Gilead's importance to the public, Miss Tyrrell, yet you don't open it to that public. In those circumstances one wonders if it really is so priceless, and exactly how heartfelt your objections to my client's proposals are.'

'Scholars and gardeners can visit by appointment,' said Saskia. 'I run a film company from the house, and it wouldn't be convenient to open it regularly.'

'In spite of your very strong feelings about its universal appeal? That seems a little strange. Many people would find even less consistent your objection to the side wing of the proposed building overlooking Gilead's garden. Doesn't it seem rather selfish to deprive the elderly poor, the most neglected members of our society, of the harmless pleasure of a delightful view?'

'Of course I don't object to their looking at the garden. It's the nature of the building they'll be looking from which I dislike so much.'

'I see,' said Parkes. 'I wonder if it would be truer to say, Miss Tyrrell, that you are the sort of person to whom things matter more than people.'

'I object,' said John, leaping up. 'Mr Parkes's conjectures about my client's character have nothing to do with the matter in hand.'

'Exactly,' said the inspector. 'Please keep to the facts, Mr Parkes.'

'Well then, let me ask you a different question, Miss Tyrrell,' said Parkes. 'Wouldn't it be true to say that your objection to my client's application is engendered by a personal grudge against Mr LeValet, and that you are determined to block his plans because of this, and not for any high aesthetic principles?'

'I object to that remark as well,' said John, jumping up again. 'It's pure mischief-making and completely unfounded.'

'I'm strongly inclined to agree with you, Mr Burnet,' said the inspector. 'It's an extremely grave accusation, Mr Parkes, and I hope for your sake that you can substantiate it. You lay yourself open to an accusation of slander if you can't.'

'Slander which will be rigorously prosecuted by my client in a court of law,' said John.

Saskia began to feel anxious again. It was all very well for John to talk so blithely of suing LeValet, but she could hardly afford his fees for the inquiry, let alone an action for slander.

'I am quite confident of my facts,' Parkes replied.

'Very well, then. But please keep to those facts, Mr Parkes, as I have already requested,' said the inspector.

Parkes turned back to Saskia.

'Did you know, Miss Tyrrell, that Mr LeValet had shares in a film company which was making a rival documentary to one of your own?'

'Yes, but . . .' said Saskia.

'I put it to you that you deliberately determined to give him as much trouble as possible. Your behaviour had nothing to do with the merits of Gilead. Wouldn't it be truer to say that you orchestrated opposition to his plans among the local residents out of sheer malice? Those here present may well wonder at such self-seeking behaviour from one who is so young and so privileged compared to those frail old people my client was trying to help.'

'I did nothing illegal in seeking to concert an honest local protest,' said Saskia angrily. 'That certainly was deliberate. I had no intention of letting him ruin one of the most beautiful parts of Clifton without a fight. Besides, he's caused me considerable trouble. He's trespassed on

my land, threatened me openly, and ordered his men to vandalise my property.'

'Careful,' whispered John, looking worried.

'Really?' said Parkes, after another rapid consultation with LeValet. 'My client says he has no recollection of any complaint against him. Did you notify the police, Miss Tyrrell?'

'No, I didn't,' said Saskia slowly, remembering too late that she couldn't substantiate her accusations.

'I put it to you, Miss Tyrrell, that you didn't tell the police because there was nothing to tell. Perhaps you too should be warned about the dangers of slander.' Parkes turned to the inspector. 'My client is perfectly ready to accept an honest judgement of his planning application, sir, but he will not put up with prejudice arising from malice, when he has nothing but the purest motives himself.'

'I object,' said John. 'My client cannot be blamed for trying to defend herself. She is a very young woman with very great responsibilities, and she is trying to act for the good of the community. I must repeat that insinuations about her character are quite out of place at an inquiry of this sort.'

'I agree entirely,' said the inspector. 'These personal remarks have already gone on far too long. I shall now proceed to hear the statements of the other members of the public.'

As the other objectors got up one by one, and Parkes proceeded to worry at their objections, John looked more and more concerned.

'That was all very unfortunate,' he whispered to Saskia, 'and just the sort of thing I wanted to avoid, especially with the press here. I'm fairly sure LeValet will lose the appeal, but if Parkes's remarks about you are repeated too freely it won't help your film, and presumably you'd prefer

not to start up a case for slander? Do you agree that we should use the newspaper article after all? It seems to me that the only option left to us now is to disarm LeValet completely.'

Saskia looked down at the pile of newspapers. Parkes's insinuations and the public denial of LeValet's harassment of her had made her angry. And it was clear to her that Munro's article would probably ruin LeValet anyway, whether it was used as evidence at the inquiry or not. She still had a sinking feeling that it would never be entirely possible to suppress LeValet, whatever they did, but in spite of that she determinedly nodded her assent to John. After the last objector had been questioned, he rose to his feet again.

'Before you proceed to the summing-up, sir, I should like with your permission to introduce a most crucial piece of late evidence on my client's behalf, which only came to hand this morning.'

'I dislike this kind of last-minute change, Mr Burnet, but if it's substantial evidence and not more insinuations, you may proceed.'

Slowly and deliberately John undid the tape on the bundle of newspapers, and spread one out on the table before him.

'This is today's *Clarion*,' he said to the inspector. 'You may be aware, sir, that once a week it has a special section on pressing social issues. There is an article on the plight of the aged in this particular section today which deals at some length with, among other things, the way Mr LeValet's Clifton nursing home is run. In view of the particular emphasis at this inquiry on his concern for the welfare of the aged, I think everyone here would find the article instructive.'

LeValet was now conferring frantically with Parkes, who had begun to look perturbed.

'My client strongly objects to the new evidence,' he said.

'But have you actually seen this article, Mr LeValet?' asked the inspector.

'No,' said LeValet. 'I don't read that sort of sensational socialist rubbish.'

'I really think you should,' said Burnet. 'I have plenty of copies here.'

He distributed them to everyone round the table, then unfolded his own copy, and took out the relevant section. On the front, in stark black and white, spread over the whole page, was Munro's picture of the old woman tied to the bedhead, above an inch-high title, 'Age Was Her Only Crime'.

John held it up and slowly turned to all sides of the room, so that everyone could see.

'This is a picture of one of the unfortunate inmates at Mr LeValet's Happy Valley home in Clifton. I submit that the accompanying article makes it only too clear the sort of establishment Mr LeValet would be running next to my client's property. Miss Tyrrell has every reason to be perturbed, and so have the elderly of this city.'

LeValet and Parkes were frantically reading the piece. Saskia skimmed breathlessly through a spare copy in front of her. Inside, making a devastating addition to further pictures of the Clifton home, which included the one of LeValet with the matron, was a half-page photo of an emaciated Somali woman lying in a heap of rags on the floor of a makeshift hospital. A small girl with hollow cheeks and staring eyes was huddled up against her. The caption underneath read, 'This African grandmother, the sole support of the orphaned child by her side, was suffering as needlessly as the old lady in the Bristol Happy Valley home. Her refugee hospital relied on out-of-date drugs supplied by LeValet's export agency.'

The photos were so powerful, and brought back such strong memories of the evening when they were taken, that Saskia had to hold on to the table edge to steady herself as she read the equally damning words which accompanied them.

'I shall adjourn the hearing for twenty minutes to give everyone concerned more time to peruse this new evidence,' said the inspector. 'After that I hope I can proceed without too much delay to the summing-up.'

LeValet, whose face had become yellowish-grey, grabbed the paper and rushed out with Parkes, ignoring everyone. Saskia was still rooted to the spot, re-reading the article, with Ben peering over her shoulder and exclaiming from time to time. When she came to the end she looked up at John.

'Unpleasant, isn't it?' he said quietly. 'I think we can safely expect to hear no more from LeValet. This'll ruin him, of course. You'd feel almost sorry for the man if you weren't sorrier still for his victims.'

The press, who had managed to get a copy of the *Clarion* for themselves, started to bombard Saskia with questions. John was valiantly fending them off when the inspector reappeared. A moment later LeValet and Parkes sidled in. LeValet looked as if he'd shrunk inside his suit. When they'd all taken their seats Parkes got up.

'My client wishes to state that the information in the article is a total fabrication, and he intends to bring libel proceedings against the newspaper concerned. Since he wishes to concentrate his energies on that he has decided to withdraw his objection to the Council's decision.'

'Very wise, Mr Parkes,' said the inspector. 'In that case I shall give a brief summing up myself, and bring these proceedings to a close.'

'Of course LeValet won't sue,' John whispered to

Saskia. 'He'd never win. The photos of the home are incontrovertible.'

Saskia hardly heard him. The release of tension combined with the heat in the room and the feelings which had been re-awakened by the pictures were beginning to make her feel extremely odd. She was desperate for some fresh air, and stumbled out of the room with a muttered apology to the inspector. As she leaned against the stone wall of the corridor, feeling sick and horribly unsteady, trying to pull herself together, everything started to shift and dissolve around her.

Ben had followed with a worried look on his face, and she somehow managed to cling on to him as he steered her into the foyer. She collapsed into a chair. As the swing doors let in gusts of wind she began to feel slightly better. The buzzing in her ears subsided. The receptionist appeared with some water, and Saskia took it gratefully, pressing the cold glass against her forehead.

'What's wrong, Sass?' Ben asked anxiously. 'Shall I get a taxi and take you home?'

'I'm all right, really. It was just so hot in there, and LeValet was so close to me.' She stopped momentarily, and shivered. 'But I want to see John when he comes out.'

'I'll go and tell him you're waiting for him here,' said Ben. 'Are you sure you'll be OK on your own for a minute or two?'

'I'm fine, truly.'

She closed her eyes, still trying to banish the memory of the photos from her mind, listening to the wind still raging outside and the door bumping open and shut as people came and went. She heard the receptionist talking to someone, and then a voice she knew only too well above her.

Her eyes dragged unwillingly open. She forced herself

to look up. LeValet was standing there, his face as pale and expressionless as a plaster death mask, his hands, the knuckles white, locked together in front of him over the copy of the *Clarion*.

'Don't think you've won,' he said. His voice was a rasp. 'There are other ways of dealing with people like you, and I never let go. Remember that when you get home to your precious Gilead.'

She felt too sick with terror and loathing to do anything except watch as he walked through the door and out on to the sloping drive which led down to the road. She sat transfixed to the chair for several minutes after he'd disappeared. Eventually she struggled to her feet and walked unsteadily to the door to make sure he'd really gone. To her dismay he was still there, standing by the Cabot statue, his dark coat flapping in the wind like the wings of a great crow. He turned and saw her looking at him through the glass panel of the door. He stood for a moment with the newspaper in his hand, then tore it across and across, and deliberately let it go. It whirled up into the air like a handful of huge white leaves, and disappeared across the green.

Chapter 18

The publicity given to Munro's article burned on for several days. The tabloids had a field day sending reporters to the other Happy Valley homes, and they were all closed within a week. Tilly was found a place in an excellent home run by a local welfare association.

To Saskia's immense satisfaction LeValet was hounded as he'd hounded her. He appeared on the television news scuttling in and out of his house with a coat over his head. On the few occasions when he was trapped into making a comment on his business affairs his excuses were so patently flawed that the interviewers laughed at him. John Burnet told Saskia that he suspected LeValet would leave the country as soon as a police prosecution seemed imminent, and she at last began to forget his words to her after the inquiry.

Adrian's film had been savaged by the critics. Mike Ogden told Saskia that he'd even stopped going to the Groucho Club. Davina meanwhile had used the publicity from Saskia's connection with the LeValet revelations to generate still more advance publicity for her own film. Everything should have been perfect, yet as they all assembled in front of the television in the drawing room at Gilead for its first screening Saskia still felt troubled.

She'd started to work on a treatment for a documentary about Brunel, the visionary young engineer who'd built the Clifton suspension bridge and helped to transform the transport system of Victorian Britain. Morwenna seemed

attracted by the idea, yet still wouldn't commit herself, and was suspiciously restless. She'd been receiving mysterious phone calls in the middle of the night, and she'd just had a blazing row over breakfast with Ben, which still smouldered on, over his decision to turn down a head chef's job at one of the best Clifton restaurants.

Now she was curled up in a chair reading the latest V.I. Warshawski detective story. From time to time she glared over at Ben, who'd recently started collecting old wine glasses, and was leafing through an antiques guide. His feet, still encased in the clogs he liked to wear in the kitchen, were propped on the fender, and he looked relaxed for the first time that day.

Saskia was half watching the clock and half watching Morwenna, who was obviously irritated by Ben's absorption in his book.

'Antique wine glasses! What good are they going to do you? And people aren't going to make you job offers for ever. Once the word gets around that you're not interested, no one'll bother.'

Saskia could see Ben tense as he put down the guide. Freddy had just got Jules to sleep in the nursery, and came into the room leaving the door ajar so that she'd hear him if he woke. She sat down next to Ben, and looked at him anxiously. Saskia hastily switched on the set and turned up the sound before Morwenna could say any more.

They'd been given the best slot of the evening, just after the Channel Five news, so at least they were assured of a captive audience to begin with. Saskia had seen the film so many times already that she knew it almost off by heart. Yet when their logo of the hunter goddess and her spotted hound came on to the screen she felt a wave of intense pride.

The opening sequence began with the sound of a solitary shepherd's flute, and a simple close-up of Artemis's

hands taken from a Horizon film of the sixties, her long expressive fingers turning a Yoruba carving of a mother and child. Then the film suddenly exploded into the beat of drums and the drama of the bull leaping. As the drums faded they were replaced with some words of Karen Blixen's that Saskia had heard Artemis quote many times to describe her feelings for Africa: 'Everything that you saw made for greatness and freedom.' The shot dissolved to a woman undergraduate, hair and gown flying, careering on a bicycle down a Cambridge street, and the story of Artemis's career began.

Saskia had given equal emphasis to Artemis's professional work and the love affair by interweaving sequences from her archive films with the Carl interview. The accent on the lure of Africa at last made the reason for leaving Carl seem understandable. After the break-up she'd stressed the role of Gilead as a place of refuge and regeneration, keeping Morwenna's most stunning shots for this section. Ben and Freddy, who had only seen parts of the film, were totally absorbed.

The final section conveyed both regret and hope, as Morwenna's camera slowly retreated away from Gilead, over the garden, and then cut to a view across the city to the hills beyond. There was a dissolve to a shot of the hills on Kenya's desert frontier, cutting to Artemis's tribal village in the present day. Morwenna had captured some fascinating tributes from the Africans who had known her, both there and in the refugee camp a few miles away. The last shot was the one Saskia had planned from the very beginning, Munro's photo of Artemis on the donkey, among the women, going to plant the new season's crops.

As the credits rolled Saskia for once felt completely satisfied with her work. She'd managed to make it scholarly and romantic at the same time. And Morwenna's camera work had been brilliant.

'It was ace,' said Freddy, her eyes shining. 'I wasn't bored for a single minute. And didn't the house and garden look perfect?'

'You should be proud of it, both of you,' said Ben.

He embraced first Saskia, then, hesitating slightly, Morwenna.

'Not bad, was it?' said Morwenna, ducking away from his arms after a moment's contact. The film had dissolved her bad humour as nothing else could have done. 'Let's hope that dozy lot at Channel Five start canvassing the BAFTA members right away. If ever there was a best arts programme, that's it. Though it is a bit borderline for that category, I suppose. Anyway, the Flaherty best documentary award would do.'

'Anything would do!' said Saskia. 'I still can't believe we actually got it out on time.'

'The book should make a bomb, and everyone'll want to see the gardens,' said Freddy happily.

The phone started to ring almost at once with friends eager to congratulate them. Morwenna switched it through to the study, and she and Saskia took it in turns to answer. After an hour of fielding calls there was a lull, and they returned to the drawing room for a congratulatory glass of champagne. Saskia's jaw ached from trying to sound pleased and modest at the same time. They'd just sat down when the phone went again.

'Your turn,' said Saskia to Morwenna. 'It's probably the Queen asking you to do an in-depth treatment of the corgis.'

'I should be so lucky,' said Morwenna. 'I'll take it in the study again. I left my cigs there. Keep some champagne for me.'

She came back ten minutes later, her face bright red and an enormous smile spreading from ear to ear.

'It really was the Queen!' said Saskia with a grin.

'Even better,' said Morwenna. 'Colossus!'

Saskia knew instantly what was coming next. Her mood of triumph began to slip away like sand trickling through her fingers.

'They've offered you a job,' she said.

'A two-year contract, with an option to renew. The money's out of this world, and there's a car and a company apartment too. LA here I come!'

It took all Saskia's courage to go and hug her.

'You don't mind, do you, Sass?' said Morwenna. 'You must see it's an offer I just can't refuse.'

'Of course I don't,' she lied valiantly. 'It's the best thing that could possibly have happened for you.'

'You didn't tell me you'd approached Colossus,' said Ben.

He was staring at Morwenna, the champagne bottle dangling from his grasp, looking like Jules when someone was about to turn off the bedroom light too soon.

'Why should I? You'd only have set up a huge moan about having to move. You can't fester here at Gilead for the rest of your life. You'll love LA. The restaurants are fabulous. Better start packing your egg whisks, Ben dear. They want me there next month.'

'He's not festering,' said Freddy, to Saskia's surprise. She normally avoided joining in these confrontations but now she was sitting bolt upright, thumbs hooked in the front of her dungarees, bristling at Morwenna like an angry terrier.

'You keep out of it,' Morwenna said, her eyes flashing. 'This is between Ben and me.'

'Then why don't you slag him off in private? I'll tell you exactly why. Because it gives you some kind of charge when you put him down. You never stop to think what it does to everyone else, and Ben especially.'

Ben set down the bottle, and threw the cork in the

fire. He sat on the arm of the sofa next to Freddy, and put his hand restrainingly on her shoulder. He looked unexpectedly determined.

'You can count me out, Morwenna. I mean it,' he said. 'I'm not going along with you this time.'

Her eyes narrowed.

'For Christ's sake, Ben, don't go coy on me now. I haven't the time to sort you out. If you think you can make me stay by acting up this way, there's nothing doing. If I listened to people like you I'd still be messing about with shampoo commercials.'

Freddy threw Ben another anxious glance. He was still very calm but he kept turning a piece of foil from the bottle over and over.

'I'm tired of you trying to remake me into your sort of man. And even if you finally did it, you still wouldn't be satisfied. I like it at Gilead. I want to stay for as long as Saskia'll have me. That's OK by you, isn't it, Sass?'

'Well, yes, of course,' said Saskia, caught off her guard. 'I might not be able to pay you too much until the funding for the next film comes in, but it's fine if you don't mind that.'

'I don't need any pay, just so long as I can go on living here. It's easy to pick up temporary jobs, and I'll earn my keep until I can work for the company again.'

'Are you crazy?' Morwenna screeched at him, 'I despair of you, Benjamin Murray. I know exactly what the attraction is. You'd think Freddy had two children.'

'That isn't true, you jealous cow. You may not have noticed, because you're too busy looking after number one, but Ben takes care of us, not the other way round,' Freddy shouted.

'Aha!' said Morwenna. 'So that's the way it goes. Found yourself another soft touch, have you? You wormed your way into Gilead, and now you've taken over Ben.'

Her green eyes were blazing. If she'd had a tail it would have been lashing from side to side.

'No I haven't,' Freddy yelled back at her. 'But if I did I'd make him a sodding sight happier than you have. You never stop putting him down.'

Jules's wails floated down the stairs and through the open door.

'Oh Christ,' said Morwenna. 'We can't even have a row in peace. The sooner I get out of this place, the better.'

'Jules has always been just a nuisance to you, hasn't he?' said Freddy. 'The same goes for Ben when he doesn't do exactly what you want. You don't understand the first thing about being responsible for someone else's happiness.'

Morwenna became dangerously still.

'I certainly understood about being responsible for Ben financially when we lived at the flat,' she said. 'And at least I don't go round bringing unwanted kids into the world.'

'You bitch,' Freddy screamed. 'Of course Jules was wanted.'

She was trembling with rage. Ben put his arm round her.

'Lay off Freddy, Morwenna. And I've already said you don't have to be responsible for me any more. I never really wanted it in the first place. I'm quite capable of looking after myself my way.'

'And we all know exactly what that means,' said Morwenna. Her voice was heavy with sarcasm, but held an underlying tremor which made Saskia suspect that she was more shaken by Ben's defection than she appeared. 'Drifting in and out of grotty jobs, and relying on some woman to rescue you if things get tough. Wonderfully fulfilling, I must say.'

'I don't see that your kind of life makes you any happier,' said Ben. Saskia wondered admiringly how he managed

to keep his temper. 'More successful, maybe, but not necessarily happy.'

'Don't give me all that New Age crap,' said Morwenna. 'Success makes me happy. It's what I need, and what I'm going to hang on to. I'm asking you for the last time. You'll never get another chance like this.'

She glared from Ben to Freddy and back again, but Saskia, who knew her so well, was sure now that she detected uncertainty in her look.

'I don't want that sort of chance,' said Ben quietly.

'OK, stay here and play happy families,' Morwenna hurled back at him. Her voice was definitely shaky. 'You're welcome to your version of the good life. I'm going back to the flat for the night. And stop looking like that, Sass. I don't need anyone's sympathy trip.'

She rushed out, flinging open the door so that it crashed against the wall. Jules's wails were becoming louder.

They all looked at each other. Ben only now seemed to be realising fully what he'd just done. His hands were shaking as he began to share out the remaining champagne. 'Jesus, that's it now! Did I really say all those things to her?'

'You were brilliant,' said Freddy. 'You should have said them ages ago. Don't you think so, Sass?'

'It was an all-time great performance,' said Saskia slowly, who felt torn between applause and dismay.

'Christ, I hope I didn't hurt her too much,' said Ben.

'Hurt Morwenna? You must be joking,' said Freddy.

'She's not quite as tough as she'd like you to think,' said Ben. 'This had been coming on for a long time, though. I knew she was up to something, but I never believed she'd leave Gilead. She seemed quite grabbed by the Brunel idea. I'm really sorry for your sake, Sass. You'll miss her a lot.'

'I'm getting used to people leaving by now,' said Saskia

ruefully. 'She'll miss us too, though she'll probably never admit it.'

Ben still had his arm round Freddy. They were exactly right for each other, Saskia thought, trying to suppress a twinge of envy. Morwenna and Ben had been like a half-tamed gypsy pony and a reliable farm cob trying to work in tandem. She was especially pleased for Freddy, who was now blooming like one of her own flowers, but it was going to make it even harder to carry on alone amid their happiness.

Morwenna reappeared the next day, and without any fuss moved her things into a separate bedroom. She brushed aside all Saskia's questions about her real feelings.

'Let Ben and Freddy get on with it,' she said airily. 'It'll be loads easier in LA without him round my neck.'

She soon went off to London to sort out her visa and network with her cronies. While she was away Saskia basked in universally enthusiastic reviews for the film. Channel Five, who'd been deluged with letters of appreciation, rang to say that by popular demand they were arranging a repeat showing before Christmas. Saskia went to London herself to do interviews for the *Today* programme and *Kaleidoscope*. She was asked to appear on the Parkinson show in December, and Davina was masterminding an auction for the option on the Brunel project. She already had enough in advances to pay off a good slice of the loan, and the book was well on the way to ousting the latest royal revelations from the best-seller list. Once she received her first payment of royalties in a few months' time all her financial worries would be over.

She was so buoyed up by success that the call from Mr Elder two weeks later seemed to come almost from another world. His voice sounded thin over the phone.

'Miss Tyrrell, I'd be most grateful if you'd call in at

my office sometime today. There's some rather urgent business I'd like to discuss with you.'

He was probably going to try to sell her a life insurance policy on the strength of the film's success, she thought lightheartedly. But he'd always been sympathetic and helpful in his own way, and she mentally wrote off a quiet afternoon working on the Brunel treatment and agreed to see him instead.

She was shocked when she came face to face with him over his desk. They hadn't met since the party. His hair had become entirely white, and he'd lost his former plump and prosperous appearance. He caught her startled look.

'I've been in hospital, Miss Tyrrell, having a fairly major operation. I'm much better now, but I've decided to take early retirement at the end of the year.'

He waved aside her expressions of concern, and picked up a bulky folder from a pile by his side.

'I only returned to work a week ago, and since then I've been checking systematically through my files. What I've found in the Gilead folder has caused me a great deal of concern. I'm afraid you must prepare yourself for some unwelcome news.'

This sounded far more serious than Saskia had expected. Her heart started to beat unpleasantly fast.

'While I was away,' he continued, 'my partner had to go abroad on urgent business. He brought in a locum to manage things here. The stand-in was inexperienced and over-confident of his abilities, a fatal combination. He advised Mr Sainthill to make a most risky investment and he got into serious financial difficulties. I'm afraid that somehow Gerald LeValet heard of it, possibly through one of our secretaries, with the worst possible results.'

Saskia's heart was racing now. She stared at him, praying that he wasn't going to tell her what she most dreaded to hear.

'For God's sake get on with it, Mr Elder. What are you trying to say to me?' She could hear her voice shaking with anxiety

'He persuaded poor Mr Sainthill, who was desperate for ready money but didn't want to foreclose on you, to transfer the mortgage into his name. This sort of thing is done very occasionally, but it's unusual and you should have been consulted. I know it's exactly what you wanted to avoid, and I can't tell you how sorry I am. The locum has been dismissed, but there's still worse to come, I'm afraid.'

Panic poured over Saskia. She guessed exactly what he was going to say next.

'Mr LeValet has called in the loan.'

She clutched her briefcase, staring out of the window at the clouds scudding by, hardly hearing the rumble of traffic in the street outside. Her worst nightmare had come true. LeValet's threat hadn't been an idle one after all.

'Can I get you a cup of coffee, Miss Tyrrell?' Mr Elder said anxiously. 'You can't think how sorry I am. It would never have happened if I or my partner had been here, I can assure you.'

She was now angry as well as afraid. She took several deep breaths, trying to steady herself.

'I don't want coffee. I just want to get out of this mess. It strikes me that I've excellent grounds for suing your firm for mismanagement.'

'Of course you'd be within your rights to sue,' he said, looking increasingly uneasy. 'You might well win your case, but with Gerald LeValet involved it could be a long-drawn out business.'

'And that's exactly what I don't want,' said Saskia, knowing as she spoke that she'd never find the strength to go through another law suit involving LeValet. 'Exactly how long do I have to repay the money?'

'You've till the end of December,' he said, looking as if he'd shortly need resuscitation himself. 'Not very long, but that's one of the hazards of a private mortgage. A building society will usually extend the period of grace.'

'Couldn't I get the money from a credit company, just till the royalties from the book come in?'

'Possibly, but I wouldn't advise it. Their rates of interest are exorbitant.'

She was silent, trying frantically to think of some way out of the problem.

'You could perhaps take out a second mortgage, though it might not be easy as you're self-employed,' he said diffidently.

'I'd rather not do that. Gilead is already involved enough.'

She wasted another fifteen minutes making fruitless suggestions for ways to raise the money in a hurry, and listening to him while he gave her a depressingly explicit run-down of what would happen at the end of December. In the end she couldn't stand the sound of his voice for another moment. She was forced to make her escape from his office with nothing resolved.

Mr Elder was still apologising as he accompanied her to the front door. He seemed so genuinely distressed that she couldn't help feeling sorry for him, but it didn't improve the situation for her in any way. As she drove back to Gilead she felt sick with anxiety. And what made it all so much worse was that everything had just started to go well again.

'You were great to drive me to Heathrow, Sass,' said Morwenna. 'I damn' well wasn't going to ask Ben to come with me.'

Saskia couldn't tell her that she'd been glad to get away from Gilead and the problem of the mortgage for a little

while, which she'd been worrying about obsessively for the past couple of days. It had taken massive self-control not to confide in Morwenna, but it hadn't seemed fair to unload such a huge problem on her just before her departure. Now she was determined to forget about it for a few hours.

She looked around her. At least the airport had an atmosphere of purposeful activity. She'd always liked the cosmopolitan crowds, the never-ending drama of arrivals and departures, the glamorous destinations on the information board. Terminal Four at Heathrow, in the middle of a late-November afternoon, wasn't too busy for once. A cleaner was pushing a sweeping machine over an already gleaming floor. The security guards were only stopping a small proportion of travellers, and Morwenna didn't even have to queue at the check-in desk.

In the throes of an adrenaline rush which had buoyed up Saskia too, Morwenna dumped her aluminium camera case plastered with 'Fragile' stickers, and the long tube containing her tripod on to the luggage conveyor. Only when the clerk had weighed them, and they'd trundled away with their LA destination tags, did Saskia begin to feel the full irrevocability of her departure.

'Well, that's done,' said Morwenna, hitching her flight bag over her shoulder. 'Nothing to do but enjoy myself now. I'll have the biggest whisky in the world once I get on board.'

Saskia felt a pang of extreme envy. At that moment she could have dumped everything and gone off with her after all. They walked slowly down towards the passport control entrance.

'I'll miss you so much, Morwenna,' she said.

'We've had some great times, haven't we? But Ben wasn't sorry to see me go.'

'You know that isn't true. And you did rather drive him to it. Maybe deep down you needed to. You know

you've never really been right for each other. You need someone different. You're sure to meet lots of great guys in the States.'

'That certainly isn't my number one goal,' said Morwenna, 'but I suppose if someone like Munro turned up along the way, I might not object.'

'Munro! But you couldn't stand him!'

'Not to begin with. But I liked him at the end, and at least he never got in the way of your career. And I have to admit now that you were a hell of a lot happier when he was around.'

'I'm perfectly happy, thank you,' said Saskia indignantly. 'I simply need a little time to adjust.'

'Really?' said Morwenna with a wicked grin. 'Well, if you say so. Just don't get mixed up with another Adrian when I've gone, that's all I ask.'

'Don't you get in with another Ben, either. I reckon I ought to send you off to the States with a "Dangerous to Men" warning round your neck.'

'I'll give you a call as soon as I've got the apartment key and sussed things out,' said Morwenna. 'Why don't you fly over for Christmas? We could have a ball. You've enough money. The book's doing brilliantly.'

'Ben's got all sorts of things planned – we'll be having a boar's head at least,' said Saskia, trying to sound lighthearted. 'And it'll be my first Christmas at Gilead for years.'

'Three's a crowd in a situation like that. It'd be much better in Beverly Hills. Think about it, anyway. Hell, there's the last call for boarding. I'd better go or I shan't have time to get my duty-frees. They always spend ages checking my passport. I ask you, do I look like a terrorist?'

'Only sometimes,' said Saskia, trying to smile. 'Oh Morwenna, Gilead just won't be the same without you.'

They hugged each other as a last-minute rush of passengers surged round them.

'Hang in there, and we'll do it again one day – make another block-buster together,' said Morwenna shakily. 'The Brunel idea's terrific too. Mind you start shooting straight after Christmas.'

The announcer called Morwenna by name this time in slightly panicky tones.

'Don't they ever stop nagging? It's just like having Ben around again,' said Morwenna. She hesitated, looking bashful. 'Tell me one thing before I go, Sass. Did I really do the right thing there? It seems sort of odd not to have him around. I could even miss him if I gave myself half a chance.'

'Don't be an idiot,' said Saskia, half laughing, half crying, and giving her an affectionate push towards the barrier. 'You've made your decision. Go and get on with it. Ben's happy, and you will be too.'

'Right, keep trucking, that's what we have to do,' said Morwenna. ''Bye, then, kid, and see you next summer maybe. We'll have the reunion of all time.'

She turned and began to walk towards the departure lounge, swinging her baseball cap jauntily in her hand. She turned and waved it at Saskia, then disappeared.

Saskia felt an instant reaction, like a piece of elastic stretched for too long, then suddenly released. She longed for a stiff drink, but with the maelstrom of the motorway ahead of her decided to have coffee instead. She bought herself a cappuccino from a fast food booth, and a newspaper, and went to sit in the waiting area. It was fairly empty except for a few stranded travellers stretched out on the seats and a very extended African family sorting out their tickets in a far corner.

There was nothing much on the front of the paper beyond a parliamentary fracas, and she idly turned over.

A photo of the civil war in southern Sudan took up the top half of the second page. She almost passed that by too, until something about it made her look again. A boy of about eleven, in a ragged uniform, stood in tears in the midst of a maize crop reduced to a waste of stumps by shell blast. He was weighed down with a rifle and a cartridge belt, and staring at the body of another child lying at his feet.

She knew instantly who had taken it. Her eye rushed to the picture credit and Munro's name, which was on the by-line above the copy as well. It was typical that he should have gone to Sudan. The fighting there was far more intense than in Somalia. Frantically she skimmed the copy. It was so graphic, the description of the carnage so vivid, that she felt sick with horror.

She put down her cup on a side table, and firmly folded the paper and stuffed it into a waste-paper bin. She wouldn't worry about him, she told herself furiously. She wouldn't allow herself to be upset. That was why they'd parted, after all, because she'd realised long ago that she couldn't stand the strain of worrying about him in such surroundings. She refused to think of him at all. She had far more pressing things on her mind. Instead she got up and made her way to the Ladies' before the journey home. It was four o'clock and the rush hour exit from London would have already begun.

As she came out of the lavatory into the washbasin area a weary-looking Asian cleaner was polishing the taps. An end of pink sari trailed limply from the front of her overall. While Saskia was washing her hands a girl of about her own age dashed out of one the cubicles and went over to a machine that sold tampons. She started feeding it coins, and smiled at Saskia as she wrenched out the metal drawer.

'What a relief,' she said. 'I thought I really was up the

spout this time. My boyfriend's just gone off to the States for a year as well.'

She disappeared back into the cubicle. Saskia sat down heavily on the one chair, staring unseeingly at the cleaner who was now polishing the mirrors.

She'd been so preoccupied that she hadn't thought about her period for weeks. Furiously she revolved dates in her head. Her last had been in mid-September, she'd missed one in October, and the next was well overdue. When Munro made love to her on the night of the party things had happened so quickly that there wasn't time to put in her cap. Munro was so desperate and so worked up that he hadn't used anything either.

In a haze of anxiety she collected her car from the multi-storey park, negotiated the M25 on automatic pilot, somehow filtered through a stream of stress-crazed commuters on to the westbound M4, and as the traffic sobered down a little began to think more clearly. She was absolutely certain she was pregnant. It would account for her faintness at the inquiry and the odd feelings of nausea she'd thought were due to stress.

Her thoughts revolved as crazily as the numbers in a fruit machine. She wondered over and over whether to tell Munro, and by the time she got to the Reading turn-off decided there was no point. Their decision to part had already been made, and she remembered only too clearly what he'd said about his initial reaction to Sabah's pregnancy.

By the Oxford turn-off she still hadn't quite been able to persuade herself to have an abortion. Yet if she went it alone there'd be no one to help. Laura would certainly disown her, and Ben and Freddy were showing every sign of careering happily towards marriage, and would then surely move out to a place of their own.

On top of all this, she still had the enormous problem

of the mortgage repayment, which became more and more urgent as every day passed. Even if she found some way of settling it, and her finances revived when the book royalties began to flow into her bank, she'd then need every penny for repairs to Gilead, and to fund the next film. That money would have to be partly diverted into paying a nanny's salary if she went ahead with the pregnancy and wanted to keep on with her career as well. And a child went on needing money for years and years. She nearly swerved into the wrong lane as she thought of it.

A pregnancy testing kit, bought at the first chemist's she came to as she drove into the city, confirmed all her worst fears the next morning. She knew from the experiences of friends that the latest she could have a simple abortion was the beginning of January. Sal Jarvis, a young camerawoman highly recommended by Morwenna, was free to begin filming in the new year, so she must have something worked out by then anyway. And this confirmation of her worst fears made it even more vital to deal quickly with the problem of repaying LeValet.

She decided in the end that she'd have to try to raise a second mortgage after all, even though she loathed the thought of jeopardising Gilead still further. She couldn't believe it would be as difficult as Mr Elder had hinted. There had been no problem before, and Gilead was worth considerably more than the loan.

The reception clerk at the first building society Saskia tried wore a badge urging clients to have a nice day. After tearing herself away from an intimate telephone conversation with a friend she insisted that Saskia filled in a long application form before admitting her to the presence of the society's mortgage manager. Saskia, fuming at the delay when she'd just wanted a preliminary chat,

was relieved to see a woman, and not another elderly paternalistic male, when she was finally ushered into the manager's office.

The walls of the room were hung with drawings of show houses, each with a burgeoning cottage garden and a sports car drawn up at the door. The manager, in her early-forties, was barricaded behind a computer and an array of telephones. She wore a cornflower blue uniform suit, and a blindingly white blouse with a crisp pussy-cat bow at the neck. She glanced down at the name on the application form.

'Hi, Saskia, good to see you here,' she said, not bothering to get up, and giving her a perfunctory hand-shake across the desk. 'I'm Dawn, your personal loan adviser. Just give me a few minutes to evaluate your data, will you?'

She didn't ask Saskia to take a seat, but began to run through the application form. Saskia pulled up a chair, deliberately scraping the legs over the polished floor, and sat down.

The woman appeared not to notice. It seemed to take her an enormously long time to read the information in front of her, but eventually she looked up.

'So how may we help you?' she enquired blandly.

Saskia tried to keep her voice even. She was beginning to wish that Dawn was elderly and paternalistic after all.

'I need a second mortgage, just for a short term, as you'll have seen from the application form,' she said. 'My house is worth considerably more than the sum involved. I think the society should consider it a good risk.'

The woman shook her head reprovingly. Her hair was tonged up and away from her face in stiff blonde curls.

'Nothing is a good risk these days,' she said. 'I'm afraid we have to think very carefully before granting any mortgage, let alone a second one. For instance, I

see from your form that you're self-employed, and it does appear that your income fluctuates a good deal.'

'That's true,' said Saskia. 'But it does in most young businesses, and I expect a large inflow of profits over the next few months, more than enough to pay off this second loan.'

The woman shook her head again. 'I wish you knew how many times I've heard those words recently. Believe me, I've seen it all from this desk. I'd had strong men in tears sitting where you're sitting now.'

Saskia was sure she detected a note of enjoyment in her voice. She began to suspect that Dawn was on some sort of power trip.

'But even if the society had to repossess my house, which is most unlikely, it's worth many more times than the loan. I've explained that already. And I didn't have the slightest trouble getting my first mortgage.'

'When you took on your first mortgage the market wasn't in the state of extreme stagnation that it's in now. If we had to repossess your property it could become a liability to the society. If the market declined further, negative equity could be involved.' She rolled the words off her tongue with evident relish.

'It would have to decline by an enormous amount,' said Saskia indignantly. 'That doesn't seem to me a valid reason for turning down the application.'

'Who knows what might happen in today's climate?' said the woman. 'It's not a modern property by any means, and the society might have to maintain it for many years before finding a buyer. We already have too many places like that.'

Saskia went on arguing for another five minutes, but it was like wading through treacle. She got nothing in return but set replies which appeared to have been learned by heart on some management training course.

'I'm afraid it's a case of having to be cruel to be kind, Saskia,' the manager said. 'I'll pass on your application to my superiors, of course, but I can tell you now that their reaction will be the same as mine. Your best move would be to try to sell the place privately as fast as possible, even at an unrealistic price. That way you might manage to keep your business intact.'

She gave an open smile of triumph at Saskia's expression.

'And believe me, any building society would tell you the same. If you doubt my word, try them yourself.'

To Saskia's dismay she was right. She spent the rest of the morning in interviews at two other building societies, with the same result, and eventually became so panicky and depressed that she decided to go home and start again after lunch.

When she got back to Gilead she let herself into the hall, and sat down on the Zanzibar chest. She felt she'd finally come to the end of the line. She couldn't think of any other way out. She gazed exhaustedly at the statue of the goddess, wondering what on earth she'd do with all the things in the house if she had to sell.

And then, as she sat there looking at its benign, smiling face, an idea almost too formidable to contemplate began to grow in her mind. Supposing she sold part of Artemis's collection of art? She couldn't think why it hadn't occurred to her before. Perhaps being pregnant was already beginning to slow down her brain. Or perhaps the prospect was so abhorrent that she subconsciously hadn't allowed herself to think of it.

She couldn't sell the goddess, of course. More than anything it embodied the spirit of the house. She trailed upstairs on leaden legs, and slowly walked along the gallery, making herself assess the collection objectively,

but everything was precious to her, everything had some connection with Artemis.

She leaned on the window ledge, looking out over the dank garden, and remembered Munro standing there on the day she'd finished filming the collection. She was assailed by a violent longing for him. She told herself angrily that it was just a reaction to the stress of the day, and determinedly walked down the gallery again, looking at the Benin heads, which were probably the most valuable things there. She forced herself to think rationally about selling them, and slowly and painfully acknowledged that it had to be done. Better that than to lose Gilead itself.

She went downstairs into the drawing room, and found an old copy of the *Antique Collector* which Ben had been studying recently. She remembered seeing details of an African art auction there. After a short search she found the advertisement. She picked up the phone and dialled.

'Shelmerdine's auction rooms,' said a receptionist's sing-song voice.

'I want to speak to whoever deals with African art. I've some items I'd like appraised as soon as possible.'

James Atherton, Shelmerdine's African expert, was away in the States, but one of the other directors made an appointment in his absence for him to come to Gilead the following week.

'And once Mr Atherton has made his assessment he'll probably be able to find you a private buyer almost immediately, given the special provenance of the collection,' his voice said reassuringly over the phone.

In spite of this, the foreclosure of the mortgage still hung over Saskia like a guillotine. But in the meantime she went doggedly on with the research for the Brunel film, hoping that something would happen to decide matters for her over the pregnancy, or that her period might miraculously

appear. Sometimes she felt almost desperate to have her body to herself again and her freedom restored. Then she'd swing the other way and wonder how she could even contemplate taking the baby's life. It would have all been so simple if she'd felt any kind of maternal protectiveness towards it, the sort of feeling her married friends had wallowed in during their pregnancies. Yet she felt nothing for her baby at all, and that worried her too.

She found her temper getting shorter and shorter. She was feeling sick more often, which made it difficult to concentrate on work. And every time she looked at Jules she wondered how she could ever cope with a child on her own. He was going through a phase of spectacular tantrums which sometimes left even Freddy unable to deal with him.

It became harder to hide her sickness, and she was feeling particularly queasy one morning in early December when they were all having breakfast together in the kitchen. She still hadn't come to any decision about the pregnancy, or confided in anyone except her doctor, though she had told Freddy and Ben about LeValet calling in the mortgage.

Ben had brought a basket of croissants to the table, still warm and yeasty from the oven. Simply looking at them made Saskia feel ill. Worse than that, they reminded her of breakfasts with Munro. Memories of him would keep coming back to her just when she was at her lowest.

Jules held out his hand imperiously towards the basket, and set up a relentless, demanding whine which seemed to bore into Saskia's head. He began to bang a spoon violently against the tray of his high chair, making the boiled egg in front of him rattle in its cup.

'You don't seem to be eating much these days,' Ben said to Saskia. 'Try one of these. There's some Normandy butter to go with them.'

Jules gave a piercing screech and flung his spoon across the room, narrowly missing Freddy. It rebounded noisily from the iron casing of the Esse, and fell with a clatter to the floor. Saskia felt her self-control vanish. She didn't want Ben fussing over her. She wanted Munro. He ought to be here, helping her to decide what to do about their baby, not mixed up with a maniac army who might kill him at any minute.

'The last thing I need is a bloody croissant,' she screamed at Ben. 'Can't you see that?'

Ben was staring at her as though she'd thrown all his cookery books on the fire, but she didn't care.

'I just want you to make Jules shut up,' she shouted. 'I can't stand any more.'

'What did I do?' said Ben weakly to Freddy.

To Saskia's surprise Freddy didn't turn a hair, She wouldn't have been surprised if Freddy had torn her limb from limb. She'd seen her terrorise people in shops who dared to criticise Jules even in the mildest way. But instead she calmly picked Jules out of the high chair and dumped him into Ben's arms.

'Be a star, Ben, and take him outside for a bit. Anything as long as you keep him quiet. Just let me talk to Sass alone.'

Ben looked bemused, but smiled his usual sweet smile and marched off with Jules, who was now silent and open-mouthed at the novelty of being whisked away in the middle of breakfast. Freddy sat down next to Saskia and folded her arms in a business-like way, staring at her consideringly as though she was some hothouse plant with an intractable case of blight.

'Bet I know what you'd really like. Some lemon tea and a water biscuit. You've got a kid on the way, haven't you?'

She put her arm round Saskia's shoulders. Like Morwenna

Freddy was so rarely demonstrative, except with Jules, that Saskia almost burst into tears.

'How did you know?' she asked. The relief of being able to share the secret with someone else was tremendous.

'Oh, Sass, it's obvious. You've been up and down for days, you aren't eating breakfast, and you switch off the telly every time a baby ad. appears.' She went over to the kettle which had just boiled. 'I felt just the same. I nearly went crazy the first three months, doing finals as well as trying to keep it dark when I went home. When's it due?'

'June. But I'm not going to have it,' said Saskia. 'I can't.'

'OK, OK, no one's asking you to. It is Munro's, I suppose?'

'What do you think?'

'Have you told him?'

'Of course not. We decided to part ages ago. I'm not going to blackmail him now.'

'I don't think he'd see it as blackmail. He wasn't like that,' said Freddy. She made some tea and gave Saskia a mug with a slice of deliciously astringent lemon floating on the top. She put a tin of water biscuits in front of her. 'Go on, have one. It'll do the trick.'

The biscuit tasted as interesting as a piece of polystyrene, but as Saskia ate she began to feel slightly better. She took a cautious sip of tea, and felt better still.

'There you are,' said Freddy triumphantly. 'Raspberry leaf tea is really good too, but you'll be fine by the fourth month anyway.'

'I've already told you, I'm not having the baby.'

'Yeah, sorry, I forgot. Have you told your mum?'

'That'd be almost as bad as telling Munro.'

'I know what you mean,' said Freddy. 'My step-mum went bananas when she found out. And I'm not sure being

a granny's really Laura's scene. She's only all right with Jules as long as he doesn't puke or shit.'

Saskia smiled in spite of herself. Freddy sat down next to her again with her own mug of tea.

'It's not as bad as all that, honest,' she said, 'not once you're used to it. You get to love the baby so much it sort of cancels out the crap and the sleepless nights. You'd be surprised how much you can cope with if you have to. And if you feed it yourself, it won't cost much to begin with.'

'I don't even want to think of it,' said Saskia despairingly. 'Truly, Freddy, would you go through it all again if you were given the choice?'

'Not the first few months, maybe, before I came to Gilead. But you were all like a second family when I came here. And you wouldn't be alone, Sass. I'd help. If anyone owes you, I do.'

Ben looked cautiously round the door, and came back into the room with Jules, who was now happily playing with a wooden angel destined for the Christmas tree.

'Is it safe now? Are you feeling better, Sass? What was wrong?'

'Just about everything. Sorry I bawled you out, Ben, but I'm pregnant.'

He stared at her again, then gave a slow, enormous smile.

'Holy Moses! What a dope I am! Why didn't I guess?'

He enveloped her in an enthusiastic one-armed hug.

'That's not bad news, though,' he said. 'It's great.'

'Come on, Ben,' said Saskia wearily. 'I've got films to make, and Gilead to keep going, and Munro's busy taking photos of death and destruction in Africa. A baby's the last thing we need.'

Ben's face clouded. He carefully inserted Jules back in the high chair, and started to cut up slices of bread to go with his boiled egg, sending her puzzled looks as he did so.

'You surely don't mean you're going to have an abortion?' he said eventually.

'Ben,' said Freddy in a soft, warning voice, 'it's Sass's decision, not yours. And her choice not to tell Munro.'

'But she can't do it. It's murder! What about the child's right to live?'

'I've got some rights too,' said Saskia wearily. 'I've thought and thought about it, but I don't honestly feel anything for the baby, not even that it's real, except when it makes me sick. I've none of the maternal urges I'm supposed to have. And I've got to go on making money to keep up Gilead.'

'The baby's the most important thing. And we'd help you. Haven't you told her that, Freddy? Besides, Jules'd love to have someone to play with.'

'It's not really the point,' said Saskia tiredly. 'I've told you I don't feel anything for the baby. How can I risk that continuing once it arrives? I know what it was like when my mother rejected me.'

'I felt exactly like you at first,' said Freddy. 'I only went on with the pregnancy to spite my step-mum. But the minute I saw Jules I loved him. And we really would help all we could.'

'It'd be some way for us to repay you, apart from anything else,' said Ben.

'You've already repaid me, more than enough. And you'll both move on eventually. You'll need your own place, and you know there isn't enough scope for Ben here.'

Freddy looked at Ben. She started to butter a croissant. As usual her small hands were covered in scratches and red from scrubbing away dirt.

'We've got a plan, Ben and me,' she said. 'We've been wanting to ask you about it for ages, but you've seemed so spaced out lately we didn't like to. It's to do with Gilead.'

'You can stay here as long as you like, both of you. Don't worry about that.'

'Squads of people have rung up asking to see the gardens since the film,' said Freddy, ignoring her. 'I know you haven't wanted regular visitors, but if we organised them properly they wouldn't be a problem. Garden freaks are usually well heeled – look what they pay to go into National Trust places. You'd make a bomb with a place like this in the heart of the city. And you could do concessions for people on benefit.'

'If you agreed,' Ben cut in eagerly, 'I thought we could open a restaurant in the orangery for visitors, and supply it partly from the kitchen garden, with a garden shop on the side. You could give us a cut of the profits, or whatever arrangement you liked. And you'd still have the house to yourself.'

Saskia looked at their expectant faces. She hated to disappoint them, and she'd been torn for weeks now over a guilty feeling that she ought to share Gilead and a child-like desire to keep it to herself.

'I don't know if I could bear to have hordes of people in the garden,' she said slowly. 'I know it sounds selfish, but part of the beauty of Gilead is being able to wander where you like.'

'Think of the hordes of people who don't have any garden at all,' said Freddy. 'And you could put the terrace and the white garden out of bounds to keep some privacy. We've worked it all out. If you want the house to yourself once the baby arrives, Ben and I can move into the mews cottage.'

'I'm still not sure,' said Saskia. 'I know that logically it's a great idea. I wouldn't want to get a huge profit out of it for myself – that wouldn't seem right – but it might make Gilead self-sufficient. I just can't seem to think straight about anything at the moment, though.'

'I've been offered another chef's job at a new restaurant down by the river,' said Ben. 'There's no hurry to decide at the moment, but I will have to by the new year.'

The buzz of the entry-phone made them all jump. Ben went to investigate. He returned with a heap of mail in his hand and put it down on the table to sort it out. He broke off, looking anxiously at a letter in a manilla envelope with an uneven Letraset address. Saskia, still thinking about their proposal, came to just in time to see him put it into the pocket of his apron.

'Let me have that, Ben,' she said. 'It's – it's one of those letters, isn't it?'

'Well, maybe,' said Ben. 'I hoped you wouldn't notice.'

He passed it to her reluctantly. Saskia began to feel sick again. The letters had been arriving every few days for the last couple of weeks. She opened it. A single sheet of paper with more Letraset printing fell out.

'You don't really think you'll find the money, do you?' was all it said.

As she held it she caught a faint whiff of LeValet's hair oil. It made her want to retch. She wondered despairingly whether she'd ever be free of him. Even if the auction produced enough cash, even if LeValet went abroad, he'd probably still find some way to harry her.

'Bastard, bastard, bastard!' said Freddy fiercely. 'If only the police would do something.'

'It's the usual problem, no positive proof,' said Saskia, 'and they're still trying to help. Heaven knows how Artemis stuck this sort of thing for all those years.'

'You look awful. I bloody well hope Shelmerdine's does come up with the money for you,' said Ben.

'Of course it will,' said Freddy fiercely.

'I bloody well hope so too,' said Saskia, with a weak smile.

'I wish you'd tell Munro about the baby,' said Ben.

'Freddy's been saying you don't want to, but you shouldn't have to cope with so much alone.'

'I keep telling you, there's not going to be a baby. Forget it. I can manage.'

'Of course you can,' said Freddy soothingly, frowning at Ben.

Saskia was beginning to feel as if she had some awful mental illness as well as being pregnant. 'Go and put your feet up in the drawing room. I'll bring you some more tea, and you can read the rest of your mail,' Freddy ordered her.

Freddy had put a match to the fire. Saskia lay on the sofa looking at the flames and wishing she had Sven to lie on her stomach like a great furry hot-water bottle. But that made her feel worse. She tried to concentrate instead on the carefree figure of Persephone treading so lightly through her flowery field, and that was just as bad, reminding her of the freedom she'd lose if she went ahead with the baby.

Telling herself fiercely not to be so morbid, she picked up the envelope on top of the pile by her side. It had a Northumberland postmark. She thought at first that it was from Meg's nursing home. But instead she took out a letter from a firm of solicitors. She read the first paragraph already half expecting the news it contained, that Meg had died two days earlier.

She lay there quietly for a moment, thinking about her aunt. She'd seen her so rarely, yet her life had always seemed so frustrated and bitter. She thought sadly what a waste it had been. The next paragraph continued:

> Your aunt particularly requested that her funeral should be private, with no mourners. Just before she went into hospital she sent us this letter with instructions that it should be forwarded to you after

her death. We have accordingly complied with her wishes.

Saskia drew out another letter heavy with sealing wax. Two pages of closely written writing fell out, as precise as Meg herself. She began to read with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension.

My dear Saskia,

We have never known each other very well. My fault entirely, but it's too late now. I always felt Artemis claimed all your attention, though it was understandable for a reason which you knew nothing of, but which I have decided, after much heart-searching, to make known to you. The doctors tell me I have not long to live, and this is my last chance to set the record straight.

Saskia took a sip of tea, wondering what could possibly be coming next.

You must prepare yourself for a shock, but one that I trust will not upset you too much, knowing your fondness for Artemis. I'm sure you know that after she left Carl Sandstrom she came to stay with the family in Northumberland for some months. I was ten then, a solitary child, the apple of my mother's eye, and I was deeply resentful of the way Artemis seemed to absorb all her attention. My knowledge of the facts of life was hazy, but I was a farm child and I knew enough to realise that my aunt was pregnant.

Saskia read on with growing amazement, scarcely able to believe the story unfolding before her eyes.

As you know the farm is isolated, and was even more so just after the war. Artemis and my mother rarely left it during the six months she was with us. The baby was born at home, and the few people who knew what had happened, including myself, were sworn to secrecy.

Afterwards Artemis went back to Africa, leaving the baby, your father, to be adopted by my mother. She doted on him, but I felt resentful from the moment he was born, and we never got on. I longed to tell him about his parentage, but I couldn't because of the promise I'd made, and because I knew how much it would hurt my mother.

Lately, however, I've been thinking that I should tell you. I gather Carl Sandstrom is still alive, and I feel you both have a right to know now that everyone else involved is dead. It's my legacy to you. Nothing as spectacular as Gilead – I sometimes regret refusing Artemis's many invitations to stay with her there – but I think you'll find it just as important, if not more so. Do with it as you think fit.

Your affectionate aunt,

Meg.

Chapter 19

December was ushered in by floods of rain. Saskia sat indoors trying to work on the new script, but staring instead over the sodden garden and thinking of Artemis.

Meg's letter accounted for so many things. The deep feeling of closeness she'd always had to Artemis, the way they were so alike in some ways. And now she had a grandfather, and such a grandfather too. It was the most wonderful of unexpected presents, yet one she couldn't enjoy to the full unless she could tell Carl. And she wasn't sure yet if she should. He was quite old, after all, perhaps too old for such a shock. But on the other hand he was in excellent shape and had, she hoped, many years of life ahead.

Then again there was all the oddness of Artemis's situation mirroring hers. Only she had no sister to adopt the baby and that was where the likeness ended. One thing was certain. She couldn't tell Carl yet about the child. It was yet another problem to add to all the rest, and again something she must decide alone.

At least when difficulties came in battalions like this they had an almost numbing effect. She felt resigned to coping with endless worry by the time James Atherton, Shelmerdine's expert, turned up to appraise the collection. He looked about him appreciatively as he climbed the stairs to the gallery.

'What a magnificent house, Miss Tyrrell. It must rank among Lutyens's best.'

He was in his mid-thirties, tall and slightly stooped, with a baggy suit and a bow tie. His face was long and quizzical, with sympathetic eyes behind wire-framed spectacles. He had a mild stammer. Saska liked him as soon as they met.

They reached the head of the stairs. It was a sunny day and the gallery was full of light. He stood staring at the Benin bronzes, then approached them reverently, inspecting them from all angles.

'I've never seen such an outstanding pair of heads in a private collection,' he said. 'Fifteenth century, at a quick estimate, and the best period. You r-r-really are extremely lucky. It'll be a pleasure to examine them.'

She found both his open enthusiasm and his stutter reassuring. He didn't seem the sort of person who'd try to mislead her or rip her off.

'Perhaps you'd like to see the rest of the collection first,' she said.

They moved on down the gallery, Atherton briefly surveying each exhibit, and becoming more and more enthusiastic. He looked stunned by the time they came to the end. He paused by an Ibo funerary mask.

'Everything else is absolutely t-top class in its way, though not so valuable, of course. It seems a pity to break up such a very personal collection. But I'd have no trouble raising the money you need just with one of the Benin heads. As for the astounding statue in the hall, you'd make several times over what you want with that.'

He took a notebook from his pocket, and started to walk back with her along the gallery, giving a rough estimate for each item as he went along.

'So I hope that's been useful, Miss Tyrrell,' he said when he'd finished. 'It's up to you now. To raise the money you want you'd need to sell about half of the less important

items, if you don't want to let the heads go. I'll do my very best for you, of course.'

Saskia sat down on one of the oak chairs at the end of the gallery.

'I suppose it had better be the heads,' she said reluctantly. 'I'll sell both of them. Somehow I feel they shouldn't be parted. So they must go to someone who'll take the pair.'

'I do understand,' he said. 'Let me look at them more closely and tell you exactly what I think they'll fetch.'

Carefully he took the head of the king from its case, and carried it over to the window. He gazed at it intently for a few seconds, and a slight frown appeared on his face. He rubbed at the bronze surface, then tapped it several times. Saskia, watching him, began to feel horribly uneasy.

'Something's wrong, isn't it?' she said, leaping out of her chair and rushing to his side. 'What have you found? Please, you must tell me.'

'Give me one more moment,' he said. His frown had increased.

He took out a magnifying glass from his pocket and began to examine the metalwork in detail. He turned to her. His face was a mixture of extreme disappointment and pity.

'I'm so sorry, Miss Tyrrell, but it's b-bad news. I was completely mistaken. This is a fake. A very clever one, but definitely a fake.' He fetched the other head, and examined it too. 'Both of them, I'm afraid.'

'But that's impossible,' said Saskia indignantly, hardly able to believe this final stroke of ill-fortune. 'Artemis would never have kept a sham here. She was an expert herself.'

'And this is an expert fake,' he said. 'I was deceived as well at first. But the more I look at it the more I'm sure. There are several details, all small in themselves,

but nevertheless not quite right, which combine to make it certain.'

'But what sort of details?' Saskia persisted. 'The heads look perfect to me.'

'The p-patina, for one thing. It doesn't have quite the necessary depth and lustre for something so old. And the detail is very slightly fudged, something that happens in even the best of copies. Can you remember how your great-aunt acquired the heads?'

'She bought them off a dealer in Calabar,' said Saskia slowly. 'And that's odd now I think of it. Almost everything else she acquired at first hand. But I remember her telling me that the minute she saw them she couldn't resist them.'

'They're extremely striking, and quite valuable even as copies,' said James Atherton. 'But certainly not valuable enough to raise the money you require.'

Saskia sat down again. The full import of his news was beginning to sink in at last.

'What shall I do?' she said despairingly. 'I'd have to sell too many of the other pieces for the money I need, and they all have special associations with Artemis's work. The collection would be ruined.'

'There's the statue in the hall,' he said yet again.

'No, anything but that. I'd almost rather sell the house.'

'I d-do understand your feelings. Is there something else here, paintings or furniture maybe, which you could perhaps send to auction instead?'

'Only family portraits, and I don't want to lose those. Some of the furniture and carpets could be valuable, but they're as much a part of Gilead as the collection. Unless – unless –'

As she was distractedly going through the contents of the house in her mind, she remembered Artemis's dresses. She'd read somewhere that forties costumes had

been getting a good price at auction recently. And these weren't just ordinary clothes.

'There are about a dozen evening dresses that my great-aunt bought while she was living in Hollywood with Carl Sandstrom. They all have designer labels. Do you think they'd do?' She looked at him hopefully.

He smiled.

'Frocks aren't my strong point, I'm afraid, but I think it's very unlikely they'd fetch the price you need. Still, you may as well show me them.'

She took him into her bedroom. She hadn't looked at the dresses since the night of the party, but now she brought them out one by one, laying them carefully on the bed. After he'd examined them he shook his head, smiling regretfully at her.

'Beautiful examples of costume of that p-period, but not quite valuable enough.'

'That's all there is. I suppose it'll have to be some of the other African pieces, then,' said Saskia with a sigh.

James Atherton didn't answer. He was looking towards the open wardrobe door with the expression of an expectant gun dog.

'But there is something else, at the end there. May I see?'

She followed his gaze.

'Oh, that. It's a tribal robe Artemis was given when she was made an honorary chief.'

He was already taking it out of the wardrobe, an absorbed look on his face. He laid it reverently on the bed, smoothing out the brightly coloured fabric, which was made of narrow lengths of silk woven in horizontal stripes.

'This is Kente cloth from West Africa,' he said. 'It's much sought after these days.'

Carefully he untied the cords which fastened the mask round the neck of the robe.

'It's supposed to represent the sun. I think it has a Picasso-esque look,' said Saskia. 'Artemis didn't wear it much. It's brass-plated and she said it was too heavy, even though it is quite small.'

James Atherton carried it over to the window. The round mask shone dully in the direct light. He rubbed at the metal. His voice shook.

'Brass-plated, Miss Tyrrell? Definitely not. This is g-g-gold.'

'Gold?' she echoed, thumping down on the bed.

'Gold,' he repeated, 'and an absolutely splendid example of an Ashante soul-disc, which was never meant to be worn like a real mask. It was supposed to embody the spirit of the king, and would have hung from his sword-belt. I've never seen one quite like it.'

'But Artemis never said it had any special value,' said Saskia faintly.

'Luckily she was wrong again. It's extremely valuable for the precious metal alone, but its age and artistry, and the connection with your great-aunt, make it even more unique.'

'Unique enough to raise the money I need?' Saskia felt a surge of renewed hope.

'I'm sure of it. Probably more, even after tax and our commission.'

'And you're absolutely certain it's not a fake too?'

'I promise you it isn't,' he said, looking almost as relieved and delighted as she felt.

He came back to the bed, and sat down by her, still holding the mask.

'I've one particular private buyer who's always on the look-out for this sort of thing. If you'll allow me to take the robe and mask back to London I can let you have his offer within a few days, and I guarantee it'll be a g-good one.'

He looked at her enquiringly when she didn't reply at

once. 'But perhaps you're reluctant to part with this as well? It is splendid workmanship.'

'It's the one thing I wouldn't mind selling. It's just that I can't help worrying in case there's some last-minute hitch, and you aren't able to find a buyer in time. I need the money so urgently.'

'We don't have an auction of African art coming up until the new year, so this is the quickest way to get it. I promise most faithfully to have a cheque for you within the next ten days.'

He was so insistent that Saskia decided to stop worrying and trust him.

At last the rain stopped, but she still hadn't made a decision about the baby. The wind went round to the east and brought with it bitter frosts, though at least it was possible to go outside without becoming drenched. She started her research trips again, and she had a note from Martha Bean saying that she and Carl would shortly be on their way to the UK. He was coming to another horse sale, and would call her from the Savoy.

Morwenna phoned too.

'Sorry I haven't called before this, Sass, but the pace is terrific here.' Her voice rang with excitement. The pace obviously suited her perfectly. 'I've had a long run-in with Colossus over the apartment they gave me. They tried to fob me off with some second-rate place miles away from the action. But I've got a great place now, and as for the car they've given me – wait till you see it. Why don't you come over for Christmas? It's not too late.'

Saskia went through all the usual arguments, wondering what Morwenna would say if she knew about the baby. She'd probably fly straight home and personally escort her to the door of the abortion clinic. She felt unsettled by the conversation, and decided the next day to take her

mind off it by doing some location research in the area round the suspension bridge. She didn't intend to set foot on the bridge itself until she had Sal Jarvis with her, but the distance shots could easily be sorted out beforehand.

When she set out from Gilead it was bitterly cold still. The bridge was starkly black against a colourless sky, the woods clothing the sides of the gorge lightly laced with snow.

She went first to check on the views from the camera obscura, which was housed in a stone tower on the downs just above the bridge. She walked briskly up the zig-zag path, paid the entrance fee, and climbed the spiral stairs to the room at the top. The camera was very simple, a mirror in the roof manipulated by a lever which reflected an image of the outside world down on to a white-painted saucer-shaped dish about a metre wide. The room was empty. She closed the door behind her to exclude all the light, and waited for her eyes to become accustomed to the darkness before she began to move the mirror.

It was an odd, rather ghostly experience, shut there in the dark unobserved, while the world outside tilted and circled on the dish, and she watched children on sledges and people walking their dogs. She'd just decided that the image was far too hazy to use in the film, and was idly moving the mirror for the last time, when she saw two figures walking along the path that led towards the bridge approach road.

She recognised one of them immediately. It was Laura, in her fur coat and her cloche hat, teetering along the path in the highest of heels. The man with her, in dark glasses and wearing a heavy overcoat, seemed somehow familiar. He had his arm firmly through Laura's, keeping her very close to him, and they were deep in conversation. The morning sun emerged briefly from some clouds, and the image on the screen intensified. The man was LeValet.

At first Saskia thought it must be some trick of the camera. Laura had said so many times that she was having nothing more to do with him. But when she checked again it was most definitely LeValet, and there Laura was, deep in conversation with the man who'd tried to ruin her daughter's life, a daughter whom she'd been saying so earnestly now meant everything to her.

Saskia rushed down the stairs and out on to the path. She began to walk quickly after them. Preserving a discreet distance she saw them go down to the road, stand talking for a moment, and then separate, Laura towards the bridge and Leigh Woods on the other side, and LeValet in the direction of Clifton village.

As soon as LeValet was far enough away she followed Laura, whose progress was slow in her high heels, and caught up with her just before the toll-booth at the beginning of the bridge. She grabbed her mother's arm. Laura turned. Her face, framed in the black hat, was paper white, her lipstick and blusher unnaturally red like features coloured in by a child.

'I saw you with LeValet, you – you traitor!' said Saskia, almost speechless with rage.

'Don't say that, Saskia. It's not what you think.' Laura clutched Saskia's jacket. Her hands were bare, blue with cold, the diamond solitaire Ralphie had given her slipping round her knuckle. 'Please, darling, let me explain. He's been pestering me for days now. I can't seem to escape him. I tried not to tell you, because you've seemed so unhappy lately, and I knew you were still worried about him.'

'Pestering you? What for? I'm the one he wants to hurt, not you.'

'He's been asking me about you and Munro breaking up, gloating over it in the most horrible way and wanting to know what you plan to do next. He goes on and on till I

can't stand any more, then he just as suddenly disappears. He waits for me every day outside the shop. I've had to cut down on going there, and leave things to an assistant, but I went in today to bank the takings. He took my arm and made me walk with him. Didn't you see how I was trapped?'

'You weren't trapped,' said Saskia, slightly less angry. Now she thought about it, LeValet had been holding Laura's arm in an odd way, almost as if he were pinning her to his side. 'You were in a public place. You could have threatened to make a scene if he didn't let you go, then run away.'

'I couldn't run in these heels. I know I was silly to put them on today, but I do like to look nice when I go to the boutique. And it's so hard to do something of that sort when you're not used to coping alone.'

'Oh, Laura, aren't I alone? Aren't thousands of women alone? And don't we manage somehow?' said Saskia, anger trickling away to be replaced by her usual exasperation. 'No, there must be some other reason why you went with him. Is he blackmailing you? Is that it?'

Laura was shivering uncontrollably in spite of her fur coat. 'I can't tell you,' she said. 'Don't ask me. I don't feel at all well.' She burst into tears, her mascara running like a clown's make-up down her cheeks. She was so pale that Saskia began to worry in case she was genuinely ill.

'Let's go and talk out of the cold,' she said, still determined to get the truth from her mother. 'Can you walk to a hotel if we go slowly?'

Laura nodded, clinging on to her and sniffing periodically, giving enormous pathos-laden sighs. Saskia half supported her across the grass and into a hotel on Sion Hill. A wonderful blast of warmth greeted them. They found a deep sofa in a lounge overlooking the gorge, and Saskia ordered some coffee. Laura leaned back against the

cushions and closed her eyes. Saskia let her rest, but when the coffee arrived she took Laura's hand. Her mother opened her eyes, obviously surprised by the gesture.

'You must tell me what's going on,' Saskia said. 'Things have been a bit better between us lately, haven't they? But if you aren't truthful now it'll all go back to how it was.'

'You won't like it,' said Laura. 'You probably won't ever want to speak to me again anyway. But promise you will, promise, darling.'

Her voice was rising hysterically.

'Of course I will,' said Saskia. 'I know so much about LeValet now, nothing would surprise me.'

'This will,' said Laura, pleating and re-pleating a paper napkin she'd taken from a holder on the table. Saskia poured out a cup of coffee and put it in front of her. Laura took a deep breath.

'I did something very, very wrong,' she announced.

There was a long pause while Saskia started to drink her own coffee, wondering what on earth Laura could have done.

'Just before your father died I started an affair with LeValet.'

In her wildest conjectures Saskia hadn't imagined this. She put down her cup with a clatter, spilling half the coffee into the saucer.

'With that – that monster?' she said. 'After my father? God, Laura, don't you have any judgment?'

'You don't understand,' said Laura, beginning to shred the napkin into tiny strands. 'I knew you wouldn't. He was different then. And I'd known him since childhood, don't forget. We were school friends. I didn't realise there was something – something wrong with him till we actually slept together.'

'But why did you need to sleep with him at all?'

'Matthew and I were so poor. I didn't care at first, but

it began to wear me down. Matthew didn't mind about anything so long as he could paint and we had just enough to pay the bills, but there was never anything over even for small luxuries. And he didn't want me to work. He needed me as a model.'

'Yet you both seemed so happy before he died,' said Saskia.

'We did have fun now and then, I admit. But I was getting lower and lower, and one day I bumped into Gerald in town. I hadn't seen him for ages, and he took me for a drink. I started to go out to lunch with him sometimes while you were at school. Matt never even noticed. He was like you in that respect. He'd get so wrapped up in his work that nothing else mattered.'

Saskia let the comment pass. 'OK, I understand, just about. But why did you sleep with him?'

'Don't be too hard on me, darling. Things happen that way sometimes. You must know how. After all, you didn't really like Adrian. We're quite alike in some ways, you and I.'

Saskia winced. 'That's fair comment I suppose, though Adrian and LeValet aren't quite in the same league. Go on, anyway.'

'Gerald was already very rich, and powerful too. There was something in that power that I found attractive. It's awful to say it, but it was a sort of aphrodisiac. I was sick of my life at home, sick of wearing cheap Indian dresses, and making do with fish paste instead of pâté, and going to Cornwall in the summer instead of taking off for somewhere fabulous in the south of France.'

'I thought you looked lovely in those dresses,' said Saskia. 'I liked Cornwall too. It was fun there.'

'Did you really think I looked nice?' said Laura, brightening a little. 'And, yes, I suppose you're right. Cornwall was beautiful. But it was always hard work for me in

those tumble-down little cottages Matthew liked to rent. Anyway, I did hold out against Gerald for a long time, because I still loved Matt. Then he was offered a job as artist-in-residence in a college in California. He only had to lecture part-time, and the salary was wonderful. But he wouldn't do it, because it would have taken him from his painting. He didn't even ask me if I minded. He just turned it down. I was so angry with him I agreed to sleep with Gerald.'

Her face had become haggard again. She pushed aside the tattered napkin and started on another one. She hadn't touched her coffee yet.

'It wasn't how I thought it'd be. I'd never slept with anyone apart from your father, and I thought it'd be like that, but more glamorous somehow. But Gerald behaved so strangely. He treated me as some sort of doll. He wanted me to lie there while he – he . . .' She shuddered, paused and went on. 'He pawed me, slobbered over me, seemed to be trying to excite himself. It had nothing to do with giving me pleasure. I wanted to escape, but he wouldn't let me. He was very strong. I just had to lie there, waiting and waiting for him to get on with things. I thought he'd never manage to do it, but in the end he finally achieved something, though it wasn't much of a performance. Then he suddenly broke down and burst into tears. I'd never seen a man cry, and it was terrible. I didn't know how to cope with that either. You'll probably think I'm even more stupid when you hear this, but in the end I just held him, as if he'd been you or any child.'

She paused for a moment. The room was very quiet except for the hissing of the gas fire.

'After that he became almost touchingly grateful. He couldn't have children because of some drug he'd once taken, but he told me he hardly ever managed to have proper intercourse anyway. His mother used to beat him

unmercifully when he was little, and I'm sure that had something to do with it. I think it accounts for Gerald's own cruelty as well. Though I loathed what he'd subjected me to, because I knew about his childhood I couldn't help pitying him. His mother had made it impossible for him to love anyone. That's a terrible thing, you know.'

As well as being completely engrossed by Laura's account, Saskia was also beginning to feel deep admiration for the way she'd dealt with LeValet.

'Go on,' she said quietly. 'What happened then?'

'He said he'd had every kind of treatment for the impotence, but nothing worked. He kept trying with new women, but every time he was a failure. The horrible part was that in spite of his disappointment he obviously got pleasure from dominating them, and from keeping a hold over them afterwards, usually financial.'

She reached for her coffee at last. The cup jittered in the saucer as she lifted it to drink. Saskia couldn't take her eyes from her mother's face. What she'd been hearing still seemed almost incredible.

'He begged me to go on seeing him,' Laura continued. 'He said I was essential to his happiness, and that no one had ever understood him as I did. I began to panic. I made some vague promises, said I had to collect you from school, and in the end I managed to get away. I was so distraught when I got home that Matthew actually noticed something was wrong. I told him what had happened. As soon as I'd told him, I knew it was a mistake. I should have kept it to myself instead of trying to make myself feel better. He was proud and sensitive, and he felt completely betrayed. He said he was leaving me and taking you with him. He had a friend in the artists' colony in St Ives, and the next day he flung his painting things and a couple of suitcases into the car, and set off with you beside him. The weather was just like now, and you know the rest.'

She set down the coffee cup. She looked even more exhausted than when they'd come into the hotel.

'I'm sorry, darling. I just don't know what else I can say. I won't blame you if want nothing more to do with me.'

Saskia, appalled by the story, put her arms round Laura. Her cheek was icy cold, but after a moment she sighed and relaxed.

At last Saskia felt she was starting to understand her mother. She could only too well imagine the horror of the scene with LeValet. It would have been enough to unbalance anyone.

Laura began to sniff, then pulled away, smiling tearfully, and searching in her pocket for her handkerchief.

'It's all right,' she said, 'I'm not going to cry. I know how much it annoys you.'

She blew her nose, and drank some more coffee.

'I'd better tell you the rest, then you'll know it all,' she said. 'After Matt died I was half mad with guilt. And every time I looked at you, and realised what you'd gone through, I felt even worse. I felt I had no right to have a child after what I'd done. I was drugged with Valium for months afterwards. We had no money and I wasn't fit to work. Up to then I'd refused to see LeValet, but in the end I went to his office and told him he was partly responsible for Matt's death. I think he did feel some shame then, for he gave me enough to live on, on the condition that I swore never to tell anyone what had happened between us. Shortly after that I met Ralphie. I knew you didn't like him, but I was desperate to get away, to be looked after, and again you know the rest. All I can say, darling, is that I hope you never, ever behave as stupidly as I did. But I don't suppose you would. You're more like your father, luckily.'

'I don't think you were so stupid,' said Saskia. 'You seem to be the only person who's really understood what

made LeValet as he is. It doesn't excuse him, but it explains so many things. Particularly how he thinks he can get his way through sheer domination. And that awful collection of his, too.'

She shivered, remembering it.

'You've seen the collection as well?' said Laura in a tone of amazement. 'It was one of the first things he showed me when I went to his house. I should have tried to leave then.'

'If only you'd told me about this before, and if only you hadn't withdrawn so completely from me. We've lost so many years.'

'What upsets me most of all now is the way LeValet keeps harrying you. He always said I was the woman he liked best – what an honour! – and he seems to have some sort of perverted interest in you because of that. Everyone says he's bound to leave the country soon if he wants to avoid prosecution, but he's never mentioned it to me. I thought I might be able to protect you by continuing to see him and trying to keep him happy with bits of information, but I haven't even been any good at that.'

'You've done brilliantly,' said Saskia. 'All those years with this hanging over you. Anyone else would have gone under completely.'

'Do you really think so?' said Laura, smiling for the first time. She was looking slightly better, and picked up a biscuit and began to nibble at it. 'I always feel such a failure when I see what you and Morwenna have accomplished.'

'I suppose I've accomplished a lot materially,' said Saskia ruefully. 'But I'm not sure I'm very happy.'

As soon as she'd spoken she realised in amazement that it was the first time for years that she'd confided something really important to her mother. Even more astounding, she found she didn't regret having done so.

'Because of Munro, you mean? You'll probably think

this sounds horribly old fashioned, darling, but sometimes you don't realise what you've got until you lose it. That was the trouble with me and Matt. It's too late for me to go back, but you've still got time. Why don't you get in touch with him? He's not the sort of person to give way first in a situation like this. Perhaps if you told me a bit more about it, it'd help.'

Saskia was silent. The new understanding between Laura and herself wouldn't easily be destroyed now, but she still wasn't quite ready to put the details of her relationship with Munro on display for her mother. And besides, the waitress had just come into the room and was about to clear away the coffee things. She looked at her watch and discovered it was half-past twelve.

'Don't worry about me and Munro,' she said gently. 'And you look as if you need a rest. Why don't we go back to your flat and have lunch there?'

'Would you really come with me? That'd be wonderful.' Laura was reviving by the minute. 'Let's walk a little way, just to get some fresh air. We'll go as far as the bridge, and see if we can pick up a taxi there.'

Saskia helped Laura on with her coat. She'd gained some weight this summer, no doubt as a result of Ben's cooking, and it suited her, but she was still very thin. They went outside and started to walk towards the gorge. A snow shower was just starting, small flakes fluttering gently to the ground.

'I can't believe it's nearly a year since I left Ralphie,' said Laura. 'It's odd how I miss him. I know you dislike him, but he was good to me in his way, and I can see now that I didn't give him much in return.'

They reached the beginning of the bridge, and stood for several minutes, waiting fruitlessly for a taxi to pass. Laura was beginning to shiver again. Saskia was just about to go into the toll-keepers' booth and ask if she could use the

phone to ring for a mini-cab, when her mother suddenly stiffened. Her fingers dug into Saskia's arm.

'No – it can't be – it's Gerald. He's coming back. He must have been watching the hotel from his car. I must go. I can't bear to see him, not again.'

She was already in a state of panic. She began to run towards the bridge, slipping and stumbling in her high heels. Saskia looked back. LeValet, in his dark glasses, was walking their way with rapid measured steps, and gaining on them fast. She turned again towards Laura, who was already well on to the bridge now, and instinctively started to follow, thinking that if they were together she could at least protect her.

The snow was coming and going in soft swirling gusts. Refusing to look below, she kept her eyes firmly on Laura, who was still stumbling ahead like a fluttering bird. She pressed doggedly on, then paused for a moment to glance back again at LeValet. Though he'd gained a little it was still possible to reach Laura in time if she kept going. But as she turned her head again the snow suddenly dropped momentarily away like the falling of a veil, and revealed the gorge below.

The river was running sluggishly between the snow-covered banks. It wound along like a cold grey snake, a dizzying distance beneath. She clutched at the parapet, unable to go on, but thinking that at least Laura had a chance of getting home safely. A car approached on the other side of the road, churning up sprays of slush. She thought hazily of flagging it down, but she was too terrified to let go of the parapet.

LeValet caught up with her. Snowflakes were clinging to his velvet collar. He took off his dark glasses. The expressionless gaze missed nothing. He slowly smiled, revealing the row of porcelain teeth.

'So that's it. You're afraid of heights,' he said in his soft,

oily voice. She'd never noticed before that it was tinged very faintly with a Somerset burr. She thought hysterically that it made him seem like some jovial farmer in a cider advertisement who was offering his customers hemlock instead. 'Your mother told me a long time ago that she suspected your father's death had left you psychologically disturbed. It was bound to, of course.'

Saskia wondered if the men in the booth could see them. They were supposed to keep an eye on the pedestrians on the bridge, but the snow had begun to thicken again. She wondered what she'd do if he assaulted her, and kept telling herself that it wasn't his way. Hadn't Munro himself said so, long, long ago? All she had to do was keep calm, not look down, not lose her head, and eventually LeValet would have to move on.

'Mentally unstable,' he said. 'How sad. But it explains everything. No wonder men won't stay with you. I'm glad. Glad that you're suffering after what you've done to me. And by Christmas I'll have Gilead too.'

'You're wrong there, LeValet. The mortgage money will be in your bank at the end of the month.' She prayed that what she was saying really would come true.

For a moment his smile faltered. She saw his hands in their black leather gloves clench and unclench. Then he recovered himself.

'You're lying. But even if you weren't, I'd get Gilead in the end. You aren't capable of looking after it. You know that in your heart of hearts, don't you? This fear of yours will gradually eat away your life as you grow older, ultimately isolate you from everyone. Look at you now, even unable to love your own mother.'

'Keep Laura out of this!' said Saskia. 'I know you seduced her. That's why my father died. '

Even that didn't stop him.

'What did your father ever do for her? If she'd come to

live with me I'd have given her everything, kept her like a princess, let nothing harm her.'

He came close to her. His breath was heavy and cloying, as if he'd been sucking some perfumed sweet.

'There's nothing I don't know about you. I understand you so well, because when I was a child my father died too. You'll never make sense of any close relationship.'

He put his arm heavily over her shoulders, forcing her to turn and look beyond the parapet of the bridge. Any passer-by would simply have thought they were trying to catch a glimpse of the view through the snow. Again, just as mysteriously as before, the swirls of flying flakes subsided, the veil dropped, and the river was revealed below her. There was the drop, the seagulls wheeling easily through the void, the mud below that looked so soft, the water deep and calm. And her terror was so extreme that she'd do almost anything not to feel it any more, to bludgeon it out of her mind.

His voice blurred relentlessly on. 'It's easy to jump. Up on to the parapet, and then over you go. Just like those birds, free at last, floating through the air, just a second's pain, and then nothing to worry about, forever. So easy, Saskia.'

His voice still bored into her brain as she clung to the last threads of self-control.

'Shall I tell you another reason why we're so alike? Because you're my child. I'd slept with Laura long before Matthew died. So now you have that on your conscience too. You've ruined your own father. You're so worthless than not even your mother can love you. There's only one course left to you.'

The insinuation was so shocking that it diverted her concentration from the drop below as nothing else could have done. She stared at him dully, feeling as if she was locked in a duel with some unbeatable machine. Perhaps

he was right. And if he really was her father how could she go on?

'You might as well do it now,' he said softly. 'You've nothing else to live for, have you?'

Panic and despair began to overwhelm her. But as she stood clutching the parapet, his arm like a yoke across her shoulders, a barge hooted downriver. She remembered how she'd been standing on the bridge last winter, and heard the same mournful sound, and felt Munro's hand on her arm. Then she remembered standing with Munro on the bank of the Severn, the first time she'd gone to the farm. What was it he'd said to her then about being afraid? With a huge effort of will she dragged his words up from her memory: 'Your thoughts are what you make them.'

She began to think clearly again, to analyse what LeValet had just been saying. And as her mind cleared she realised with joyous relief that it couldn't possibly be true. She'd believed Laura when she'd said that LeValet couldn't have children. His mother had hated him, but her own mother did love her, and had told her the truth. She wouldn't let him ruin her life. LeValet the great illusionist had deceived her for the last time. Nothing he said could harm her now.

Calmly she let go of the parapet, pulled away from his arm, and turned to face him.

'You're lying, LeValet. Lying as you've always done. I know the reason why I'm not your child, and I know that because of it you'll always be the loser in the end. I've made my choice. I'm going to my mother.'

He stared at her. His smile had vanished. For a moment he recovered himself.

'You stupid little girl, you'll never cross the bridge on your own.'

'Watch me, if you don't believe me,' she said.

She wasn't sure herself if she could really do it, but she

knew it was the only way to convince herself as well as LeValet that she was whole again. She turned and began to walk away from him. Halfway across the bridge she looked back. LeValet was still standing there, almost obscured by a final flurry of flakes, and as insignificant as the little figure in a toy snowstorm. Strangely, she found she could even feel sorry for him now.

As she went on towards Leigh Woods her confidence increased with every step she took. The shower ceased completely and the sun shone again. A thousand small waves glittered on the water below, making it seem like a crystal stream. The city lay all around her in its Christmas calm. Steadily she walked on until she reached the other side.

Chapter 20

The re-establishment of a rapport with Laura gave Saskia more pleasure than she'd ever dreamed of. But it didn't quite extend to telling her about the baby. That might have been too much for Laura to take, and could wait still. It might even not be necessary.

Yet in spite of this new pleasure her heart still felt as if it was in a deep-freeze like the world outside Gilead's windows, which continued to be locked in icy cold. James Atherton had asked her to go out to dinner with him when she was next up in London. She liked him. He was amusing and sympathetic, but she didn't feel anywhere near ready for a new involvement, and in any case he'd probably drop her if he knew about the baby.

By the time of Carl's visit she still hadn't decided whether to tell him about Meg's letter. Perhaps, now she'd got her mother back, it was selfish to want a grandfather too. And she'd thought so long and so uselessly about the abortion that as the deadline drew nearer and nearer she began to think she'd go ahead with it out of sheer mental exhaustion.

On the morning of his visit she dressed carefully in jeans and a baggy knitted sweater splashed with pink and red poppies. It comprehensively concealed her waist and breasts, which were already slightly larger.

Most surprisingly Carl appeared without Martha. He was wearing a Burberry and a deerstalker, and carrying a long box done up with Christmas paper and an enormous

tartan bow. In spite of the clothes he still managed to look unmistakably American. After he'd sent the chauffeur away with a large tip, and instructions to enjoy himself and return after tea, he came indoors, shaking the snow from his coat. Saskia helped him take it off, and he put the box down on the Zanzibar chest.

'Your present,' he said. 'But I want to give it to you when I go.'

'It's so good to see you,' said Saskia. 'I thought Martha might not let you travel down here in this awful weather.'

'How did you guess?' he said with a conspiratorial grin. 'She put Bristol strictly out of bounds. But I struck lucky. She started a cold yesterday, and she's lying in bed popping every pill known to medical science and driving the Savoy staff crazy. I pretended I was going out for a day's shopping. She'll probably clap me in irons when I get back.'

There was a bowl of deep blue hyacinths on a side table in the drawing room, filling the room with the scent of spring, and by the window a vase of powdery mimosa which Saskia had been unable to resist in a Clifton florist's shop. Carl sat down in a high-backed chair she'd drawn up to the fire. She couldn't stop looking at him, still unable to believe that he was her grandfather, and in the end she had to tear her eyes away in case he began to think something was wrong.

'Let me get you a drink,' she said. 'I bought some Bushmills in your honour.'

'I'd like that. With just a splash of soda, please,' said Carl.

He looked entirely at home, tanned hands lying relaxed and calm on the tapestry arms of his chair, smiling at her, prepared to enjoy himself. She started to pour out the whiskey, wondering how she could possibly break into the careful structure of self-preservation he must have built

for himself over the years since Artemis's departure. He'd somehow managed to retain his dignity and go on enjoying life to the full. Unlike herself, she thought bitterly.

'And how are you?' he asked. 'Morwenna said you've been having a hard time lately.'

Saskia nearly directed a stream of soda on to the floor instead of into the glass.

'You spoke to Morwenna? When?'

'In LA. I went to the eightieth birthday party of a very old friend. I called her while I was there.'

'What did she say?' Saskia asked, bringing him the drink, and sitting opposite him with her own glass of ginger ale.

'Not much. She was pretty discreet for Morwenna. It made me think that perhaps things were worse than she said.'

'I had some financial problems over Gilead, but they're sorted out now. We're opening the gardens to the public in the spring, and the place might even start to pay for itself. Everything's fine.'

'So why don't you look better? I left you last time looking as if you'd come straight out of one of your own rose beds, and find you like this.'

'It's the winter,' said Saskia lamely. 'Everyone gets this way in Britain in December.'

Carl looked at her keenly.

'Come on, Saskia. After all those years keeping actresses sweet I do know when something's gone wrong with a woman.'

She stared down at her drink. He hadn't come to Gilead to hear her woes. Yet the impulse to say to Carl what she'd up to now hardly been able to say to herself was suddenly irresistible.

'Munro went away. I sent him away really. I thought – I thought I'd done the right thing.'

There was a tender, knowing pity in Carl's gaze that made her want to cry.

'This sounds like a re-run of something else, doesn't it?' he said gently. 'Yet not quite, if you're not sure now. Why is that?'

'For lots of reasons. And I was too involved with the film to see things clearly at the time.'

'I know what you mean,' said Carl. 'It's what Orson Welles used to call another reality. It can take over. But you'll learn to detach yourself as you go along.'

Saskia looked up at him gratefully. 'I should have known you'd understand. But it's too late to do anything now. He's too far away.'

'It's never too late. He's not on Mars, is he? You aren't entirely without a knowledge of modern communications.'

Saskia smiled in spite of herself. Carl had Artemis's knack for putting things in proportion. The dry comment braced her, and now she wanted to tell him even more. She couldn't stop herself.

'It's not just Munro. There's something else. I've been wondering for weeks whether to tell you, and worrying about your reaction, I kept telling myself I shouldn't, but I have to do it. The last thing I want is to hurt you.'

He put down his drink on the side table, frowning slightly.

'That's a pretty serious-sounding trailer,' he said. 'But fire away. I think you'll find nothing much surprises me these days.'

She began hesitantly. 'Do you ever remember Artemis talking about someone called Meg? She was my father's sister, Artemis's niece.'

'Very occasionally, I guess. Artemis never mentioned any of her family much apart from Phoebe. She was very fond of her. And your father wasn't born then, of course.'

'Meg died recently,' said Saskia, feeling more and more uncertain the nearer she got to telling him. 'Before she died she wrote me a letter. Her lawyer sent it on to me after her death.'

She felt in the pocket of her jeans, drew out the letter and handed it to him.

'I've thought and thought about letting you see it. If the contents displease you in any way, please put it in the fire and we'll never speak of it again. If you want to go straight back to London I'll understand. But if you are pleased it'll make me happier than I can tell you.'

Slowly he took the letter from the envelope and unfolded it, his face wary, obviously not quite sure in spite of his earlier words what to expect. She couldn't bear to watch while he read. She went over to the window and stood looking out at the snowy garden. It looked as if it could never come to life again.

There was complete silence behind her, except for the crackling of the fire. It lasted so long that she began to wonder nervously if the news had made him ill, and what she'd do if it had. She was on the point of turning round when at last she heard him move. His footsteps came across the floor towards her. She felt his arm round her shoulders.

'My dear, dear child,' was all he said.

She turned and looked up at him. He was smiling.

'You don't mind!' she said incredulously.

'Mind! It's the best Christmas present I've had in eighty years. I couldn't have a grand-daughter I liked more if I'd chosen you myself.'

He folded her in his arms. She put her own round him as well. It was such a comforting, unaccustomed sensation, one she hadn't had since she'd sat with her father as a child while his stories brought the past to life for her, and his

presence had made her feel that nothing could ever harm her while he was there.

They stood together in silence for a long time until at last she remembered his age again, and wondered if he was getting tired. She gazed up anxiously at his face. He smiled.

'It's all right,' he said. 'No need to look that way. I'm in fine shape, and with news like this I intend to live another twenty years. But there's a draught here that's coming from Alaska. Could we go back to the fire?'

He sat down next to her on the sofa, studying her.

'I want to look at you properly,' he said. 'You're all Artemis, I'm pleased to say. Nothing much of the Sandstroms there.'

She was grateful to him for keeping his voice light. She was on the verge of tears, and didn't want to inflict any more stress on him.

'But at least you have something from me,' he said. 'Movies must be in your blood. I'm proud of that.'

'I wish we'd known before,' she said. 'We've lost so much time. I've tried and tried to puzzle out why Artemis didn't tell you. I can only think it was because she didn't want to blackmail you into leaving your wife.'

'That would be like her,' he said. 'Generous to a fault, but so stubborn too. I had some rights in the matter whatever she may have thought.'

Saskia was silent, thinking of herself and the baby and Munro.

'I hate to think of the misery she must have endured going through with it on her own, and then giving up the baby,' Carl went on. 'If only I'd had a chance to know Matthew. I always wanted a child, and Yvette could never give me one. You must tell me everything you remember about him.'

Guiltily dismissing the uncomfortable thought that she

wasn't giving Munro a chance to know about their child either, she tried to recall for Carl everything she could remember about her father. They talked for almost two hours, until eventually Ben, who'd been discreetly keeping to the kitchen, appeared with the news that lunch was ready. To Saskia's delight Carl told him and Freddy the news, and sent him off to the village for a bottle of champagne.

After lunch Saskia remembered Martha's admonitions and made Carl take a nap in the study while she sat quietly at the desk sorting through some of Artemis's old photos to give him, and looking lovingly at him as he slept. As dusk began to fall Ben brought in tea, and left them again to talk.

'Pack your bags now and come to the States with me for Christmas,' said Carl impulsively. 'We're leaving tomorrow, but Martha can fix another seat on Concorde. You'd love the ranch, and we could call Morwenna and have her visit too.'

'If only I could,' said Saskia, remembering the baby again. She'd got a place booked at a clinic for immediately after Christmas. It was the one thing she still couldn't tell him about. It would be the height of cruelty to present him with the prospect of a great-grandchild, and just as swiftly snatch it away. 'Ben's got a huge Christmas dinner all set up here, and Laura's joining us. But I'd love to come in the new year. And maybe you'll spend next Christmas at Gilead.'

'I guess I'll have to make do with that, then,' said Carl. 'But don't leave it too long. I don't want to miss out on anything now.'

He had to leave soon after tea. She helped him back into his coat in the hall, and when he'd buttoned it, he picked up the present he'd left on the chest, and handed it to her.

'Go on, open it. I want to see your face.'

The parcel was very heavy. She pulled away the ribbon, unfolded the wrapping paper, and came to a long old-fashioned box covered with red Morocco leather. She lifted the lid, and drew in her breath sharply when she saw the gold-plated statuette on its marble plinth.

'But this is your Oscar! You can't give it away, Carl. You just can't.'

'I've two more at home, but this is the special one, the one I got for *The Eye of the Storm*. I wanted you to have it after my first visit here. I always felt it belonged to Artemis, because I put everything I felt for her into that film. It should stay at Gilead.'

He placed it on the carved stone mantelpiece. It stood there, tall and grave, arms folded across the hilt of its long Crusader sword, like another presiding spirit, a new one to stand with the African goddess.

Saskia embraced him, almost in tears.

'I just don't know how to thank you,' she said.

'Hey now, don't cry,' he said. 'It wasn't meant to do that.'

He put her away from him, holding her hands.

'You don't have to thank me. But will you listen to a little grandfatherly advice before I go? Get in touch with Munro. Call his agent, ask for his address, write to him, cable him, send a runner with a message in a cleft stick, anything it takes, and see if you can't work something out. Because I don't want to have to spend the rest of my life watching you regret this.'

She sighed. 'He knows where I am if he wants me. And it just wouldn't work anyway.'

'How do you know till you try? Let me tell you, Saskia, I'm an expert in unhappiness, and it never did anyone any good. I wonder if you've really thought about how he must have felt. And it's not so easy for

a man to climb down over something like that, not even these days.'

Saskia sighed again. He was saying more or less the same thing as Laura, but she couldn't even think straight about the baby, let alone Munro.

Carl smiled. 'Think about it, at least. I just want you to be happy. And don't I just sound like a typical parent already? I'm going to enjoy this role.'

He kissed her. 'It's been a wonderful day, but Martha's probably sending for the police by now. I'll give her a call on the car phone on the way back.'

Saskia went with him to the limousine. He folded his long legs inside, and the chauffeur tucked a rug about his knees.

'Like an old horse put out to pasture with his blanket,' he said, smiling at up her. 'Enjoy life while you're young.'

Saskia woke early on Christmas Day, just before dawn broke. She lay quietly for a few moments, trying to establish why she felt happier than usual. A more than satisfactory cheque from the buyer of the ceremonial mask had gone into her bank earlier in the week to pay off the mortgage loan, and LeValet had slipped away to South America in a final blaze of publicity. But it wasn't for either of those reasons. Then she remembered about Carl.

She draped the embroidered cotton quilt round her like a cape, and went to the window seat, watching the garden fill with a cold grey light and thinking about his parting advice to her. It seemed a long time since she'd sat there on the day Munro went away. She wondered what he was doing now. She imagined him having coffee on a tropical verandah before going off for a celebration lunch in some ex-colonial hotel. But more likely he was huddled in a gun emplacement while bullets whizzed round his ears and he tried to make notes for his next report. Carl hadn't

even met Munro. He didn't know as she did his ruthless dedication to his work. He'd have no interest now in a voice from the past.

Before she could start to think too much she dressed quickly in her leggings and Artemis's old grey sweater, the one thing of hers she still wore. The evening dresses had already been sent to Shelmerdine's next costume auction. Down in the kitchen everything was quiet, though Ben had evidently been up before her, because bread was rising on the stove, and the Christmas cake stood resplendent on the dresser waiting for its icing to dry. In the drawing room everything was ready, presents under the tree and the fire laid and waiting for a match. She wondered if Jules had woken yet, and went softly up to the nursery. She opened the door a crack. He was sitting on the hearthrug like a small prince, surrounded by the toys from his stocking, while Ben and Freddy looked fondly on. She withdrew cautiously. She didn't feel she had any part in their happiness, but Alicia and Tilly as well as Laura were coming for Christmas dinner at one o'clock, and she had somehow to get through the day till then.

She made herself a cup of coffee and some toast, then pulled on her usual cold-weather location clothes, a Norwegian army surplus ski-patrol jacket which reached almost to her knees, and leather flying boots lined with sheepskin which she'd found in Bath market. She scribbled a note for Ben and Freddy, and went outside to the car. The air was cold and still. The sun had only just risen, and was peering sullenly through a bank of yellow cloud.

The Beetle obligingly started at once. She switched on the heater, and drove through the silent suburbs towards the motorway. Brunel had once mapped out a plan for an extension to the Gloucestershire canal system, and she needed to check on the site before she completed the shooting script. She'd avoided going there earlier because

it was only a few miles from Water Netherne, but now it seemed as good a way as any of filling up the time before dinner.

After an hour of hopping in and out of the car, plodding across frozen fields, and finally deciding the location was useless, she got back into the car, turned on the engine, and while the interior warmed up again wondered what to do next. There was something exhilarating about being on her own in an empty world, and she decided on the spur of the moment to drive down the road past LeValet's farm and see what was going on there. She might even, if she felt strong enough, go on past Shipaground Farm, and if she passed that test the day wouldn't have been entirely wasted.

LeValet's fields were unploughed and already reverting to fallow, withered grass matted the base of the fences, and the farm sign was half fallen from its frame. She drove slowly on, and the road began to rise slightly, among winter pastures where sheep were sheltered in the lee of hedges thick with ivy. As she passed the coppice at the edge of Munro's land she saw that it had been thinned and tidied, and the younger chestnuts neatly coppiced.

She was congratulating herself on her self-control until she came to the farm track. A large For Sale sign was fixed to the firmly padlocked gate. She pulled the car up by the gate and sat gazing at it. She knew Munro had gone long ago, she knew everything was over, yet she hadn't thought that he might sell the farm. She was a fool not to have realised he wasn't the sort of man to keep anything simply because of a sentimental attachment. Nothing else could have so effectively and remorselessly emphasised the end of the affair. As she continue to gaze at the sign she realised that in its way Shipaground Farm had been almost as important to her as Gilead. They'd been able to make new lives there, unhampered by the past. Too late

she began to see what Munro had meant about starting off together in a different place.

The thought was too undermining to contemplate for another moment. She looked at her watch. Still only eleven o'clock, and another couple of hours to while away before dinner. She'd drive out the demon by walking to the river. It'd be interesting to see the water in this strange wintery light, and then she could turn her back on Shipaground farm forever, just as Munro had done.

She left the car in a lay-by, clambered over the gate, and trudged down the farm track. The ruts were full of ice, air bubbles trapped in its depths, the ground powdered with snow, and untidy garlands of grey-green mistletoe in the tops of the apple trees. When she got to the gate into the courtyard that too was locked. No dog barked, and the house had a dead, blank look.

Not allowing herself to think that it had been a terrible mistake to revisit the farm, she skirted the side of the yard, and picked up another small path which led to the bank of the stream. It was colder here, and she began to walk briskly towards the river.

The tide was far out, leaving a vast expanse of shining mud flats. She'd never seen them so exposed. White-fronted geese were coming in across the water towards the reed beds a mile or two down stream, flying in a long ragged skein, spilling the wind from their wings as they dropped lower and lower, plumage dark against the yellow-grey sky. The scene was deserted, mysterious, the sombre colours like a Chinese brush painting.

She clambered down on to the shore, and started to walk away from the land along one of the narrow limestone shelves which made a natural pathway through the flats. It was like walking over a sheet of grey satin, the mud on either side absolutely smooth with a dazzling sheen. When the ledge petered out at a low outcrop of rock she

stood watching the birds again. She wasn't lonely, though she was alone. There could be no going back over her decision to part from Munro, even though coming here had confirmed what she'd always known in her heart of hearts, that it was wrong. But now she'd acknowledged that, she could start to plan her life again.

She found herself at last able to think calmly about the baby. The world around her was so beautiful that perhaps she had no right to deprive a new life of the chance of experiencing it too. For the first time, as she imagined seeing it grow up to share all this wonder, she began to think of it as real. She stood musing for a long time, until at last the cold drove her to turn reluctantly towards the shore.

As she did so she realised that a vague background roar she'd been hearing in the distance for the last few minutes was getting louder. She listened again. It sounded like far-off thunder, but she'd never heard thunder at this time of year. She looked out across the river, and saw a long white blur on the horizon. She wondered idly what it was, and then her attention was reclaimed by the birds.

When she looked at the blur again it had turned into a wave extending right across the flats, sweeping directly towards her. It wasn't very high, and still several hundred yards away, but it was coming in fast, engulfing the river bed as she watched. Almost too late she remembered what Munro had said about the bore, the freak wave which at certain spring tides swept up the Severn from the sea.

The outcrop was far too low to shelter on. She began to run back along the stone shelf. Her heavy boots were caked with mud, and the surface slippery. Twice she fell and dragged herself up again. She could hear the roar increasing behind her. The water reached her feet when she was still about ten yards from land, and poured round her ankles.

She could still hardly believe it was happening, the wave had come upon her so fast. Almost detachedly she thought what a stupid way it was to die. And she didn't want to die. There was too much to live for. She couldn't see the stone pathway any more, slipped again, and felt one foot sinking into the mud. Desperately she hauled it out, leaving the boot behind.

The hem of her coat had sopped up icy water like a sponge, weighing her down. Her other boot was full of water, and she could hardly move against the swirling tide. Somehow, as the water rose towards her knees, she managed to inch along the shelf, almost hysterical with panic, and finally dragged herself on to the shore.

She sat there panting and shivering among a heap of seaweed and bits of flotsam and watched the wave sweep on, increasing in height as the river narrowed below the cliff, and inundating everything in its path. She was trembling, her leggings soaked to her thighs, the arms and hem of her coat saturated, her gloves gone altogether, her scarf hanging like a dishcloth, and there was mud everywhere. She was so cold that if she didn't move soon she'd never be able to.

She struggled up the bank, sat briefly to discard the other boot, and made her way painfully towards the farm. All she could think of was her desperate need to be warm. She dragged herself through the kitchen garden, past a pile of rotting Brussels sprout stumps, and almost fell against the back door. She'd had some notion of breaking a window to get in, but as she steadied herself on the handle it surprisingly turned and opened. She thought hazily that the estate agent must have forgotten to secure the lock when he left.

She sat down on the floor of the passage, tugged off her socks, dumped her jacket, and began to walk in bare feet towards the kitchen. The flag stones were icy beneath her

feet. She pushed open the kitchen door, and a faint and unexpected warmth met her. She wondered if Mrs Gadge had come in to air the house. Yet it was strange that she should be here on Christmas morning. Now she could hear the Aga roaring, the damper open to increase the draught. Maybe Mrs Gadge was still here.

She walked further into the room, and the next thing that was odd was the photo on the dresser. The picture of Sabah had gone, and instead there was one of her Munro had taken in the boat. She was holding the tiller, wearing the grey sweater, her hair blowing round her face. That was even more puzzling. Why should he have put it there when everything was over between them?

Her mind only seemed to be working in slow motion and as she advanced further into the room it took her a moment or two to register the heap of luggage in the middle of the floor. A metal camera case, a tripod, a scuffed leather suitcase, and an old canvas rucksack, all still bearing their Heathrow destination tags.

Water was dripping from her leggings on to the flagged floor. She stood there, frozen as much with shock as cold, and watched unbelievingly as the door from the scullery was kicked open, and Munro came into the kitchen.

He was carrying an armful of logs. He stopped, and staring at her dropped them in one heavy tumbling fall into a basket by the Aga. He was haggard under a deep tan. He'd lost weight, the lines of his face were harsh with fatigue, and he hadn't shaved. He looked weary to the bone, and there wasn't a hint of welcome in his expression. Even through her own wretchedness it was obvious that he didn't want her there.

'I'm sorry,' she stammered. 'I didn't know you were back. I'd never have come in if I had.'

He didn't say anything, but remained by the door, unmistakably waiting for her to leave. She sensed that he

was right at the end of this particular tether. Now she just wanted to leap into the car and drive and drive, back to the shelter of Gilead, and forget the look on his face. But she'd already tried to forget him that way, and it hadn't worked. Her eyes went to the photo again. Through chattering teeth she said the first thing that came into her head.

'I w-wish you weren't selling the farm. I always liked Shipaground so much.'

'You *liked* it?' His voice was heavy with disbelief. 'You never liked it. It didn't stand a chance against Gilead.'

'I w-was mistaken. I realise it now.'

If she didn't get nearer the Aga soon she'd become an icicle where she stood. But she couldn't go to the fire unless he asked her to, and she didn't think he would. It was too late.

'And what am I supposed to do about this mistake?' he asked. 'Turn my life around yet again? Sorry, Saskia, but I've had more than enough.'

She pushed back her hair from her face. The ends were wet, and a shower of drops spattered the oilcloth surface of the table like tears.

'I don't want you to do anything. I only wanted to say I was wrong, nothing else. Can't you accept that?'

His shoulders hunched. In a moment he'd turn away to fetch more wood, and she'd have to leave.

'What more do you need?' she said, on the verge of despair. 'I'd even go down on my knees, but I'm too bloody cold.'

He at last seemed to notice her properly. She wondered if he'd actually realised before this that she was wet and covered in mud. He frowned, as if he was thinking about what she'd just said, and went to the Aga and opened the fire door. She could see the wood glowing red-hot behind the bars.

'What have you done to yourself?' he said slowly.

'I just fell on the shore. I'm all right. I'll go in a moment.'

'You'd better get warm first,' he said.

She wasn't sure how she reached the chair by the fire. She collapsed into it, dragging the old crocheted rug on the back around her, and holding out her hands to the blaze.

'I'll get you some brandy,' he said, going over to the dresser, and pulling a bottle of Remy Martin from a cupboard. He began to search for a glass, still looking preoccupied. She began to feel slightly better.

'Why did you come back?' she asked. It was like talking to a stranger, but at least she was still here, and he was speaking to her.

'I got malaria again. I was in hospital in Nairobi till yesterday. The doctors told me not to work in the tropics any more. There didn't seem much point in hanging around, so I caught an evening plane home, and a taxi from Heathrow. I arrived an hour ago.'

She gazed at him as the full implication of his words sank in.

'But never to work in Africa again! That's terrible. I'm so sorry. What will you do?'

'Make the best of it, I suppose,' he said bleakly. 'I'd decided I'd had enough anyway. Of war, I mean.'

He came over to her with the glass of brandy. She wondered whether she should drink it, then decided she had to get warm somehow. As she took it his fingers touched her skin.

'Christ, you *are* cold,' he said. He felt the wrist of her sweater. 'And soaked too. What happened exactly?'

'It was the bore. I didn't realise it'd cross the flats so fast. For a few yards it caught up with me. That's why I had to come in.'

His face remained hard and unreceptive.

'I'm surprised you didn't see it coming. You were lucky

to get away so lightly,' he said. His voice was still wary. He obviously thought she was exaggerating the episode to make him sorry for her.

'Believe me, I was surprised too,' she said. 'I don't seem to have been much good at seeing anything coming lately. Anyway, I really am leaving now.'

She drained the last of the brandy and stood up. Her body felt as if all the bones had been filleted out of it. She clung to the back of the chair while she tried to summon the willpower to give up the heat of the stove. She wished he'd stop watching her, and just leave her alone. He frowned.

'You still look cold. Do you want to have a bath before you go? The water should be warm by now.'

A bath was the one thing that could have made her willingly relinquish the heavenly heat of the fire. She could imagine submerging herself in it, letting the water lap round her while it banished the last of the cold. But she hesitated, remembering what had happened on the night Sven was killed.

'Don't worry,' he said. 'I'll make myself scarce. I want to cut some more wood anyway. You can let yourself out when you've finished. I take it your car is working this time.'

'Of course it is,' she said indignantly.

'Well, go on, then. What are you waiting for?'

He took up a stack of mail which had been tossed on to the table, and began to sort the business letters and the Christmas cards into two neat piles.

She went to the door, still clutching the blanket round her, then paused.

'Munro,' she said. He didn't look up from his task, but she knew he was listening. 'I meant it when I said I'd made a mistake. Not just about Shipaground, but about us, about everything. Of course I don't expect you to do anything about it – I've no right to – but

you must believe me, and that I didn't deliberately come here today. The last thing I'd ever want to do is hurt you again.'

She closed the door behind her and slowly began to climb the stairs. Her knees felt as if she'd been on a trampoline for a week. The bathroom was like a cold store and about as inviting. She let the blanket drop to the floor and peeled off her leggings and pants, draping them over the luke-warm radiator and wondering how she'd be able to stand putting them on again. The sweater was at least partly dry, and she couldn't bear to take it off until the last minute.

The room was too cold to linger in a bath so she turned on the shower. The water gushed out at just the right temperature. She stepped into the bath at the far end, trying to summon up the courage to peel off her sweater.

As Munro heard Saskia's footsteps go falteringly up the stairs, he was wrestling with a stubborn determination not to become involved again. All through his absence in Africa he'd never been totally able to forget her. Even in situations so dangerous that they should have concentrated his mind completely, thoughts of her had always been there. As soon as he'd seen her, mud-bedraggled but defiant still, the old longing had returned. But he absolutely refused to risk another rejection.

His irritation increased as he remembered there were no towels in the bathroom cupboard. He fetched one from the pile Mrs Gadge had left on the ironing board in the scullery, and mounted the stairs. He hesitated by the bathroom door, then went in, thinking grimly that if she really meant what she'd said his presence would make no difference anyway.

She was standing in the bath in a cloud of steam, her hair knotted up, her long bare legs streaked with mud,

still wearing the old grey sweater which just skimmed her bush. If she hadn't been shivering so uncontrollably she'd have looked like a shot for some erotic calendar.

He tossed the towel over the stand. 'Come on,' he said roughly. 'The sooner you get on with it, the sooner you'll feel better.'

'I can't, I can't. I'm too cold,' she said. Her eyes were dark with exhaustion. Downstairs he'd been so sure she was exaggerating her state, but now he wasn't certain any more. She looked as if she'd had almost more than she could take.

'Hold up your arms,' he said.

She stared at him.

'Don't look,' she said. 'Promise you won't look.'

'I'll just help you off with the sweater and go, I swear,' he said.

She put her arms above her head like a child, and he pulled the sweater over her head, keeping his eyes carefully from her. He draped it over a chair, and as he turned to go made the fatal mistake of glancing at her just once. She was standing there like an alabaster statue, rigid with cold.

He couldn't leave her like that. He picked up a sponge. It was hard after months of disuse, but as he held it under the spray of water it became warm and heavy in his hand. Very gently he began to move it down her arms in long sweeping strokes, then across her shoulders and down her back. She sighed, and he saw her relax. As he continued the mud dissolved and flowed in streams down her legs and thighs. The skin was taut on her breasts, the veins faintly blue beneath the skin, the nipples darker than he remembered. Almost absent-mindedly he put down the sponge, placed his hands over her breasts, then slid his fingers down across her skin to

her waist. That was larger too, yet she hadn't put on weight. He looked up at her. Her face was set and anxious again.

'You're pregnant, aren't you?' he said, feeling as if he were in the middle of some enormously complicated game of chess which he didn't even know if he wanted to win, in which all the pieces had suddenly been moved to different positions.

Saskia, watching his expression, almost gave way to complete despair. 'What if I am?' she said. Her words came out in a gasp. 'It doesn't concern you.'

'Doesn't concern me? Why not? Presumably I had something to do with it.'

His voice was harsh, and she started to shiver. He took up the sponge once more, and the water flowed over her body. The sensation was blissful, yet she dared not relax completely. His face was intent and completely preoccupied. She shut her eyes and stood in a sort of trance, wondering how she could have allowed herself to be trapped like this.

Suddenly the sponge was removed, the water abruptly ceased, and there was complete silence except for a few final drops from the shower head. For a moment she thought he'd gone away, and then she heard him speak again.

'I want it to concern me. You'll always concern me. Christ, Saskia, you don't do anything by halves, do you? First you nearly drown yourself, and then this. Could we take it that I really do believe you now? No more surprises, please.'

To her astonishment there was a tender amusement in his voice. She felt his lips on her breast and then on her mouth. As she was beginning, incredulously, to respond, he grabbed the towel, wrapped her in it, lifted her over the edge of the bath, and set her down on the floor. Firmly he

propelled her before him across the landing and into his bedroom.

Snow was beginning to drive across the river, extinguishing all the familiar landmarks and wrapping the plum tree in a white muffler. There was a stack of driftwood in the grate, and another pile by the hearth.

'Get into bed,' he said, as he put a match to the fire.

She slid between the sheets, shuddering as the cold linen touched her skin. He began to undress. The fire spluttered rapidly into life, blue flames flickering through the salt-impregnated wood. He got in with her, wrapping his arms around her, and running his hands over her back, as if he had to learn her body all over again.

'When's it due?' he asked.

'June. But I've got an abortion booked for the new year.'

'Do you really want that?'

'No. I want the baby, because it's part of you.' As soon as she'd spoken she discovered she meant it. Now she was with him she couldn't imagine how she'd ever not wanted his child. 'But – but I just didn't think I could go through with it alone. It's all right now, though. I shall manage.'

'I'm here if you need me,' he said.

She levered herself up on one elbow, looking at him uncertainly. He was smiling at her.

'But what about the war photography? Have you really decided to give it up? How can you be sure?'

'I'm sure. I knew I'd changed when I got to the Sudan. I'd had such a surfeit of horrors by then that I was beginning to be impervious to them. That's the time to quit, before you lose your sense of compassion. Without it you're dead anyway.'

She was silent for a moment, thinking how difficult the decision must have been for him.

'But there's still Gilead,' she said, hardly bearing to

mention it even now. 'I can't give it up entirely. I am trying to share it, though. I've decided to open the gardens next year, and Ben's going to run a restaurant in the orangery. So I must be there sometimes. Yet I love Shipaground too.'

'One damn psychological crisis after the other, isn't it?' he said cheerfully. 'If it isn't me, it's you. I wonder if either of us is fit to be a parent.'

The return of his sense of humour reassured her as nothing else could have done. And he was so warm, and she felt so safe. But she had to get things straight about Gilead.

'You haven't answered me,' she said, kissing him. He tightened his arms around her.

'Shall I tell you something strange?' he said. 'When I was in hospital in Nairobi, and things couldn't have looked worse, I kept thinking of Gilead and wanting to be there. I never thought I'd become hooked on a house in that way, but I suppose it was connected with you for me, in the same way that you loved it because of Artemis. I began to understand how you felt. I was wrong to insist you broke away so abruptly. And it'd be a shame for our child not to have Gilead as a second home.'

'So you won't sell Shipaground after all?'

'Don't you fancy the idea of a house in the Auvergne?' he said teasingly. 'It'd be a lot warmer than here.'

'The Auvergne? Were you really going to France?'

'After Christmas,' he said.

She was silent for a moment, thinking how nearly she'd missed seeing him again.

'I'd like to start off at Shipaground,' she said. 'You were right about that.'

'Later on perhaps we could spend the winters at Gilead and the summers here.' He smoothed his hand gently over her pelvis. 'How are you feeling now? No aches, no pains?

Seriously, if you've the slightest twinge I'll have the local GP over right away, even if he's just got his scalpel into the turkey.'

'No pain anywhere,' she said, smiling. 'Severn mud must have miraculous powers.'

He laughed. His words had made her remember something else, and she lifted her head for the last time.

'Dinner at Gilead – Ben – he's cooking a goose. I promised I'd be there.'

'Stuff the goose,' he said. 'I'll ring Ben later and tell him to put Christmas on hold for a couple of hours.'

'But the snow – we'll never get back if it goes on like this.'

He kissed her again.

'The Landrover'll make it.'

His hand was edging lower.

'You can throw your script away now,' he said. 'This is going to be one scene you won't direct.'

Epilogue

It was late March. The elite of the British film and television world had gathered for the BAFTA awards in the Great Room of the Grosvenor House hotel in Park Lane. Immense tulip-shaped chandeliers blazed down on candle-lit tables laden with crystal and silver. Mirrored walls reflected back the deep red carpet and damask napery. From the balcony which circled the room television cameras recorded the scene, as roving cameramen picked up additional shots among the guests. The air was heady with the mingled scent of perfume and flowers.

At a table in the centre sat Saskia and Munro. Freddy and Ben were there too, as well as John Burnet and Davina. Morwenna lounged opposite Saskia in a claret-coloured tuxedo suit with satin lapels and earrings like small golden apples. She'd flown over from the States with her new partner, who looked like a beach boy but had turned out to be one of Hollywood's sharpest young directors. She'd hardly contradicted him at all so far, which Saskia thought was an encouraging sign.

Two places were empty. Miss Moxon was camel-trekking in Rajasthan with an equally intrepid elderly friend. And Laura was back in South America. For once in his life Ralphie had performed an incautious act and come storming across the Atlantic to persuade her to return. He seemed considerably chastened by the difficulties of a diplomatic existence without a wife to entertain for him, and set out to woo Laura all over again. Predictably she

had melted, sold the business, and gone back with a huge sigh of relief to being a diplomat's wife. Saskia and Freddy had done their best to make her stay, but she wouldn't be persuaded.

'Let's face it, darling, I'm not a career woman, and never will be. Ralphie really does need me, you know,' she'd said.

But Saskia missed her, and was sad that she hadn't managed to hold on for a little longer and discover that she could make a life for herself alone.

'Shame about Laura missing the awards,' said Freddy, echoing Saskia's thoughts. 'Silly old thing, copping out like that. And it seems all wrong not to have Carl here too.'

Saskia and Munro had visited him in Arizona recently, and she'd asked him then if he'd attend the BAFTA awards, but he'd been surprisingly unenthusiastic, saying he was too old to go to any more ceremonies of that sort.

Dinner had just come to an end, a meal not even Ben could fault, avocado and gravlax with mustard sauce, guinea fowl in red wine, and a compôte of fruit with a liqueur parfait. Coffee was served, and after a brief floor show the awards ceremony began.

A broad catwalk projected into the room among the tables. At its head a short flight of steps led down to a dais with a lectern, flanked by two huge television screens. Three nominations were read out for each category of award, brief clips were shown on the screens, and a celebrity revealed the name of the winner. One by one the recipients stepped on to the cat-walk, walked its length to the lectern, and received their golden mask trophies.

Saskia, nearly seven months pregnant, had eased off her high heels under the table. Not even Munro had been able to dissuade her from wearing them. She felt as if her legs and feet were the only unchanged part of her. She was

wearing a dress sent by Laura, who'd been provided with a boutique near the embassy by Ralphie as part of the inducement to lure her back. The dress was tight-sleeved and low-necked, made of black chiffon spangled with jet sequins, and flared out softly above her knees.

Munro, who'd astounded Saskia by donning a dinner jacket, was next to her and keeping one eye on Adrian, who sat with Tina at a nearby table smoking a very large cigar. Adrian looked supremely confident, gelled hair gleaming under the chandeliers, and an outsize red carnation in his buttonhole. His film about Artemis had sunk without trace, but while he was making it Saskia's successor at Metropolis had produced a brilliant and evocative documentary on Vaughan Williams. Adrian immediately gave himself top credit as the director, and was now basking in the totally unmerited glory of a BAFTA nomination, unfortunately in the same category as Saskia's, a new one recently created for the best historical documentary.

The previous award winner left the stage, and the presenter finally came to the nominations in their category. When the clips were shown they included a glorious sequence on Gilead from Saskia's film. She was almost breathless with suspense. The baby was pummelling away inside her like a prize-fighter, but she hardly noticed it. Munro took her hand beneath the table as the lights went up again, and the presenter stepped forward.

'And to tell us the name of the winner, I am honoured to introduce a very special guest. Please join me in welcoming, here from the U.S.A. just for this occasion, one of the all-time Hollywood greats, Carl Sandstrom.'

Saskia drew in her breath in astonishment. She stared at Munro. His hand tightened on hers.

'We fixed it when we were in the States,' he said in a whisper. 'You don't mind, do you?'

'Mind!' said Saskia. 'It makes the whole evening perfect, even if we don't win.'

Down the steps at the head of the podium, silver hair shining under the spotlights, tall and dignified in immaculate evening dress, came Carl. There was a massive round of applause. When it finally ceased he took up the golden envelope containing the name of the winner. He tore it open, and slowly drew out the card inside.

'Ladies and gentlemen, I'm proud and delighted to announce that the winner of the award in the category for the best historical documentary is . . .' – he looked up and smiled – 'my grand-daughter, Saskia Tyrrell, for her film "Artemis".'

The room burst into a storm of applause and exclamations. To the joy of the cameramen, Munro gave Saskia a kiss that only ended when he had to come up for air. Saskia, scarcely able to believe she'd won, hurriedly crammed her feet back into her shoes, and stood up, clutching the edge of the table. Everyone was shouting congratulations at her. Across the aisle Adrian was already getting up to leave, his face ashen with disappointment. As he passed Saskia he stopped for a moment, somehow managed a wry half-smile, and threw something on to the table in front of her. She looked down. It was the keys to his Porsche.

Munro gave her a gentle push. 'Go on, Carl's waiting for you. And for Christ's sake be careful in those heels.'

She slowly mounted the steps to the catwalk. Even now it was hard to believe that this moment was actually here. She hesitated for a second, feeling vast and ungainly, then told herself firmly that she was proud. Proud of carrying a child, proud of being Carl's grand-daughter, proud of winning the award.

She lifted her head, and started to move confidently down the catwalk, as graceful as a ship in full sail on

the last stretch home. She reached Carl's embrace. The audience was wild with excitement. He handed her the trophy, and embraced her again.

'My turn to surprise you,' he whispered mischievously.

Holding the golden mask on its heavy plinth in the crook of her arm, she faced the onlookers and began to speak.

'I wish to thank the Academy for honouring us in this way. The success of the film was due to many people, but two in particular. To Morwenna Bly, whose brilliant camera work has already brought her a BAFTA craft award in her own right this year.'

Morwenna leaped up, almost overturning her glass of champagne, and acknowledged the applause with a vigorous power salute.

'And to Munro Hawkshaw for endless professional and emotional support, the results of which are obvious to you all this evening in more ways than one.'

There was an appreciative ripple of laughter through the audience. Saskia glanced towards Munro, and to her delight saw that he was actually blushing.

'But it gives me the greatest pleasure of all to know that in my film I was able to present to the world a true portrait of that most loving and generous of women, Artemis Venner. Perhaps it has gone a little way towards repaying her for Gilead, her final gift to me, the gift of revelation and hope restored.'

Her great-aunt Artemis's surprise legacy comes as a gift from the gods to Saskia Tyrrell. Still smarting from the abrupt termination of her career with Metropolis Television, she sees the chance to make a fresh start: Artemis Venner's life story will be the subject of her next documentary; Gilead, the exquisite Lutyens house near Bristol's glorious Royal York Crescent, will provide just the ambience she needs.

It's an uphill struggle. Saskia's ex-boss mounts a rival production – and a dirty tricks campaign. Her next-door neighbour, sinister property developer, Gerald LeValet, has designs on Gilead – and on its attractive new owner. And she can't work out whether her love-hate relationship with brilliant war-photographer Munro Hawkshaw is simply a delicious distraction or something more serious . . .

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